

THE SPEAKING IMAGE: ON CINEMATIC LANGUAGE AND THE SHAPING OF MEANING

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Abstract: When discussing cinema, we refer to a medium that communicates through more than words alone. Cinema relies on a complex visual and auditory language that exists in a relationship of interdependence with human emotion and perception. This article explores the specific characteristics of cinematic language and examines the intricate processes through which meaning is generated within this artistic realm. Through the dynamic interaction between image, sound, editing, and temporality, cinema becomes a representation of totality. In this sense, totality does not refer solely to the reproduction of reality, but rather to the transformation of the cinematic experience into expression. Consequently, the article highlights the role of elements of cinematic language in constructing narrative coherence, as well as the mechanisms through which immersion is produced.

Keywords: *cinematic language, cinematic experience, cinema expression, immersion, visual and auditory language.*

Introduction

Through numerous means of expression, we can clearly observe the existence of a living process of signification, through which cinema visibly transforms experience into expression. This naturally raises several questions: what turns the image into meaning, how is meaning shaped in cinema, and what are the fundamental elements of cinematic language?

In light of these questions, the role of the image, the frame, camera movement, rhythm, editing, and even silence becomes essential in shaping meaning within. This leads us to another question: what function does silence hold within the cinematic universe? In this regard, cinema should be understood primarily as a medium of visual expression, capable of conveying meaning even in the absence of words.

Over time, film has established itself as one of the most complex and varied forms of artistic expression, an art that brings together creativity, intention, and the freedom to communicate through images.

Only gradually did filmmakers come to understand that their work goes beyond simply recording reality and belongs to the realm of the arts. A crucial moment in this trajectory is Hugo Münsterberg's work, *The*

Photoplay: A Psychological Study (1916), considered by many researchers to be the first clear attempt to legitimize film as an art form, anchoring it, too, in a psychological framework (Gaut, 2002).

Since the early days of cinema, film has undergone various transformations and distinct stages of development in terms of how it conveys meaning. At a particular moment in cinema history, film scholars have identified the moment when the boundary between reality and fiction began to gradually take shape. Within this perspective, the films made by the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière were oriented towards reproducing reality, and they are known for hiring cameramen to travel the world to capture certain events.

On the other hand, George Méliès spent his time in the studio, devoted his work to fiction filmmaking. There are numerous films, notably including the adaptations of novels by *Jules Verne: A Trip to the Moon* (1901) and *20.000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1907). In Méliès' case, this represents an alternative mode by reproducing reality, by constructing an imaginary world (Bergan, 2021, p.14). Thus, it becomes evident that the meaning in cinema is not found in the image, but is constructed through the interaction of cinematic elements.

However, this "imaginary" realm discussed here can be interpreted by engaging in a critique of the cinematic work from both inside (through its formal elements) and outside (through the author's vision and contextual factors). In this light, understanding the author's intention may clarify the structure of the film's message.

From this standpoint, as an illustrative case, George Méliès' personality and his conception of the world may indicate to us, before any experience, the meaning of the entire message within his films (Martin 1981, p.34). Understanding this process shows us film as a form of thought, not just as representation. Artistic individuality shapes the way a film conveys meaning, and this principle is recognizable in the practice of any filmmaker. Within this framework, this mechanism is general, not only particular.

This dynamic fits within a broader understanding in which cinema has its own language which, unlike verbal language, is closely linked to the sensory and emotional involvement of the viewer. This art form has become a language through its own means of communication. Today, the cinematic image speaks to us by activating the viewers' perception and through its own style, which is visibly different from one filmmaker to another.

The genesis of cinematic language: from reproduction to expression

Film emerged as a visual recording technology, and the majority of early subjects consisted of "non-fiction or current events". These usually included filmed landscapes, which could be considered "postcards" from distant places, while recent events were sometimes captured through "thematic newsreels" (Thompson, Bordwell, Smith, 2024, p.13).

The Lumière brothers' first films were simple representations of everyday life, such as *The Arrival of a Train* (1896) or *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895). The latter was made "from a single shot filmed outside their photographic plate factory. It is conclusive for the main attraction of these early films: the realistic movement of real people" (Thompson, Bordwell, Smith, 2024, p.11). As a result, these visual representations were short-lived, static, unedited, without dramatic intent, and had a specific purpose: **to show, not to express**.

Building on this historical foundation, the viewer is confronted with raw facts, and the reproduction of reality does not inherently produce meaning.



Photo 1. Workers leaving the Lumière Factory (1895)
Source: YouTube



Photo 2. The Arrival of a Train (1896)

Source: YouTube

As shown in the examples above, we observe the presence of these raw, ambiguous facts. Throughout the film, we do not observe the presence of editing or camera movement. There are no effects, narration, or symbols. In such a configuration, meaning is not directed. Despite the enthusiasm generated at the time in this technological novelty, it does not enjoy expressiveness. For contemporary audiences, it may be difficult to understand the extraordinary level of interest shown by early film enthusiasts, when the viewers had never seen moving photographic images before (Thompson, Bordwell, Smith, 2024, p.11).

With the progression of early film practices, there was a gradual need for a language, a method of organizing meaning within a cinematic product. Reflecting this transition, Thompson, Bordwell, and Smith call George Méliès a **magician of cinema**. He transformed film into an artistic tool, worked across multiple genres, and marked the beginning of cinematic fiction. He gained recognition for his films that featured special effects, sets, and costumes, which were, at that historical moment, distinct from common film conventions.

Building on this, in Méliès' case, we approach that imaginative world, the idea of dreams, visual construction, and conscious compositional framing:

With the exception of the films made in Méliès' early years, many of his films involved sophisticated stop-motion effects. Devils burst out of

a cloud of smoke, beautiful women disappeared as if by magic, and lively men turned into demons before returning to earth. Some production designers criticized Méliès for relying too much on static theatrical sets instead of exploring the possibilities of editing. However, recent research has shown that, in reality, the stop-motion effects he created did involve editing. He cut the film to perfectly match the movement of an object and its transformation into something else. Such cuts were meant to be imperceptible, but Méliès was undoubtedly a master of this type of editing (Thompson, Bordwell, Smith, 2024, p.18).¹

In the current landscape of filmmaking, the art of moving images has evolved into a markedly more complex practice, requiring more refined attention from filmmakers. Bazin (2014, p.21) believes that when a filmmaker wants to resort to the “powers of special effects”, they must use significantly more complex techniques than the “traditional tricks inherited from Méliès”. Bazin’s observation underscores the need for an improvement in terms of common special effects used by filmmakers, based on the notion that technical progress inevitably renders earlier techniques obsolete. Considering these aspects, Bazin (2014) makes us aware of the fact that any progress creates a distance and an inability to accept old techniques.

As the medium continued to develop, cinematic language gradually began to take shape, when approached through the lens of expression. Cinema progressively moved toward becoming a more creative and expressive system. Consequently, key expressive tools such as framing, composition, editing, rhythm, and *mise-en-scène* began to develop. Ultimately, it consolidated its status as an art form, with its own tools through which it moved from reproduction to expression, giving full shape to its language.

From Image to Meaning. Foundations of Cinematic Language

In this respect, George Méliès made the transition from an *aesthetic of attraction*, which could only impress by means of the idea of significance, more precisely through the act of projection itself, to an *aesthetic of narration*. In line with this shift, we refer to the story that was being projected at the time.

A telling example of this transition can be found in *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, which constitutes a key early film in the history of cinema, as it

¹ Quoted and translated from the Romanian edition. Publisher: UNATC Press. 2024.

was 13 minutes long and consisted of several frames linked together by George Méliès. It was constructed in a distinctive manner, whereby he strung the frames together, the images "dissolving into one another" (Șerban, 2016, p.30).

From this point onward, numerous elements that can add expressive value to a cinematic work have been developed, and Martin (1981) illustrates the case of photography, which gives the image a value that goes beyond simple reproduction, which is related to expression. Upon closer examination, a similar dynamic also emerges in terms of meaning:

Although it faithfully reproduces the events captured by the camera, the image, by itself, provides no indication of the deeper meaning of those events; it merely affirms the materiality of the raw fact it reproduces (provided, of course, that it has not been manipulated), but it does not convey its significance. Thus, the image of a fight between two men does not necessarily reveal whether it is a friendly confrontation or a violent quarrel, and, in the latter case, which of the two opponents is in the right. Therefore, the image in itself *shows*, but does not *demonstrate* (Martin, 1981, p. 32).²

The image is marked by ambiguity, and Martin (1981) clarifies how a filmmaker can impose clarity with a simple reproduction of reality. Cinematic language has a number of subtleties, and the meaning of images can often seem difficult for viewers to understand. Similarly, if we draw a parallel with literature, we can also notice the difficulty of understanding the meaning of certain expressions or words in a given context. Therefore, also in the case of a cinematic work, we may face multiple interpretations of it.

However, the meaning of the image "depends on the cinematic context created by the editing, and also on the mental context of the viewer, each reacting according to their tastes, knowledge, culture, moral, political, and social opinions, ignorance, and prejudices" (Martin, 1981, p.33). This dependence on context reveals some of the reasons why the audience may face multiple interpretations of the cinematic work.

For this reason, to prevent the image from remaining a mere raw fact, cinema has gradually developed its own means of expression. If the image cannot prove anything, it is the filmmaker who steers interpretation

² Quoted and translated from the Romanian edition. Publisher: Meridiane, Bucharest, 1981.

through formal choices and the primary level of this selection is the frame, which limits, organizes, delimits, and orients meaning.

As Martin (1981) explains, framing is the simplest and most essential means through which the camera relates to reality. With framing, the reality can be transformed into artistic material. Consequently, if we examine more closely, this leads the frame to be considered a tool for guiding perception in a film, since any camera position provides a perspective. More than that, the size of the shot, the camera angles, and the camera movements are also pivotal. They convey essential information, depending on the context, about power relations, status, and even influence emotional intensity.

Deleuze (2012) sees the cinema as a “system that reproduces the movement by relating it to a specific moment in time” (p.19). Significantly, the author analyzes Bergson's third thesis from *Creative Evolution* and attempts to reformulate it. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that not only is the moment we discussed earlier an immobile section of movement, but, as Deleuze says, “movement itself is a mobile section of duration, that is, of the Whole or of a whole. This implies that movement is something deeper, which means change in duration or whole” (p.22).

Thus, in Deleuze's view, the frame does not appear to be a limitation, but rather a portion of a constantly changing whole. In the Bergsonian sense, movement could represent more than physical displacement, referring to the expression of duration. This philosophical approach may contribute to meaning construction, opening a broad discussion on cinema as a mode of thought and not just as a visual representation.

From a practical standpoint, a normal angle, from the viewer's eye level, may indicate that the character is perceived as an equal or indicate equidistant attitudes and relationships (Druga, Murgu, 2002, p.18). On the other hand, a low angle, where the camera is placed below the character's eye level, making them appear taller than the viewer, could inspire dominance, authority, or threat. Consequently, even slight adjustments in angle or perspective can alter the viewer's interpretation.

Building on these aspects, the composition plays a decisive role in shaping meaning. Composition may help us understand where the characters are placed in the frame, which elements stand out, which spaces are empty, and which are filled. At the same time, it is essential not to overlook the importance of off-screen space, the space that remains beyond the frame.

In many cases, what remains outside the frame creates mystery, tension, anticipation. Nevertheless, it is relevant to consider what happens in

the viewer's mind when they interact with the off-screen space. The underlying mechanism becomes relatively clear: the viewer tries to mentally fill in this unseen space and, most of the time, tries to give it meaning.

Once perception within a single shot has been established, the questions of how shots relate to one another becomes essential. How can we shape meaning within a film?

In essence, editing comes into play, helping audience determine this progression. Editing emerges as a central element in building narrative and emotional coherence in a film. Simply constructing a frame cannot resolve all the ambiguities of an image. By organizing images, by placing them in a logical order, meaning gradually begins to build, thus making editing a meaningful element in cinematic language.

Accordingly, Aumont, Bergala, Marie and Vernet advance a broad definition of montage, calling it a principle that "governs the organization of visual and sound elements in cinema, or ensembles of such elements, by juxtaposing, sequencing, and/or establishing their duration" (2007)³. Therefore, just as these authors include juxtaposition in their broad definition of montage, it is worth noting that it is commonly employed to highlight thematic ideas and create new meanings. Montage encourages the viewer to participate cognitively and establish connections between two images. Usually, the viewer seeks to construct these connections so that they are logical or symbolic.

Furthermore, extending this perspective, we can also discuss an additional layer of meaning by compressing time through ellipses or creating tension through rapid or abrupt cuts of frames. Therefore, this technique helps shape how events in a cinematic work are understood, but also how emotions are perceived. Last but not least, it is worth emphasising that meaning may also be constructed through narrative.

In addition to framing and montage, other expressive elements may contribute effectively to the shaping of meaning. Martin (1981) calls them *non-specific elements* because they do not belong strictly to the art of cinema, but are also used in other arts, such as theatre. Within this line of thought, we may include here the lighting, which enhances the expressiveness of the image and creates atmosphere. This crucial element can reveal inner states or even guide the viewer's attention within a shot.

³ Quoted and translated from the Romanian edition. Published at. Idea Design & Print. Colecția Balcon, Cluj, 2007.

Alongside lighting, we may add costumes and décor elements, which can convey relevant information about the historical period in which the film is set, the characters' status in society, their identity, while also shaping the symbolic atmosphere of the scene. Equally important, we should emphasize the acting, sound and colour.

Complementing these visual elements, through dialogue, music, and sound effects, sound is a crucial element that may influence the rhythm of a film, creating continuity and reinforcing what the image conveys.

All these visual and audio choices mentioned above carefully devised by the filmmakers, contribute an essential layer of meaning, forming a complex system that gives cinema a coherent and expressive language. The visual and auditory elements create meaning and build the viewer's relationship with the film, contributing to the construction of a language that becomes a crucial tool for generating what we call *immersion*. In this case, we do not refer only to the shaping of meaning, but also to the experiencing of it.

Totality and immersion: from perception to experience

When we discuss the film as a whole, we are not merely referring to reproduction. Cinema is more than reproduction and relies on the entire system outlined above to transform experience into expression. The entire cinematic universe creates its own autonomous, coherent world, which, through its various expressive means, offers the viewer a complete experience. Crucially, this process requires distinguishing between the perception of separate elements and their cohesion in a unified system, which transforms them into a whole, which we call *film*.

Therefore, this global experience generated by cinematic totality today is the result of the integration of all elements of cinematic language. If we try to connect this whole with the viewer's experience, it may be argued that this constitutes an experience that all filmmakers should take into account so that the film is not only watched, but also lived and felt in its entirety. The film viewer enters into a process of interpreting the film world they are watching and, through the elements of language, voluntarily steps into a cinematic experience that may differ from one viewer to another.

When the logic of the entire film becomes coherent to the viewer, immersion usually occurs, namely, the viewer's absorption in the world of the film. We often associate this term with mental absorption and emotional investment in the film's narrative. For immersion to occur, mental and

emotional involvement is required, and this involvement depends on rhythm, editing, continuity, narrative coherence, visual style, or sound.

Critical discourse often isolates a single element of a film, be it the image, the script, editing, or the sound, as being decisive for its success. Yet, a film ultimately functions as a system, and all these elements form a unity. In this context, immersion becomes possible when these components work in the same direction.

From this perspective, editing contributes to the continuity that allows the viewer to feel part of the film, while sound reinforces the entire experience. It may provide depth, tension, and, last but not least, help create the atmosphere.

On the other hand, it is essential to understand that immersion also occurs through the way in which time is experienced by viewers in a film, and this is influenced by the rhythm and duration of the frames. Furthermore, cinematic temporality becomes an essential element for immersion, without which viewers would not be able to experience the cinematic work as a whole.

Beyond the expressive devices discussed above, immersion may occur more easily when empathy and emotion are viewed as the foundation of immersion. Thus, by identifying with the characters in a film, the viewer gains an emotional understanding of the film's world, which helps them experience its meaning and find themselves in the story.

Thus, the viewer transitions from simple perception to lived experience. By producing immersion, we understand that all elements, whether visual, auditory, or narrative, have worked effectively as a whole.

Conclusion

The arguments and elements presented in this study contribute to the understanding that each element of expression contributes to the construction of meaning and the shaping of the viewer's experience, and each is equally essential.

From its earliest attempts to construct meaning, cinema has developed its own mode of expression, in which the interaction between all elements is paramount. The very process of cinema's evolution may be regarded as defining for the dynamics that meaning produces in a film today.

Considering the seventh art as a whole may help clarify its expressive potential, and its capacity to generate immersion, a process that may also be understood as a dialogue between the film and the viewer.

The viewer has been, is, and must continue to be capable of entering the world of film, engaging with it cognitively and emotionally. Without

the viewer, meaning in cinema could not emerge, as the entire cinematic product acquires meaning through the encounter between cinematic language and the viewer.

The power of cinematic language lies at the core of this ability to combine and shape experience, leading the viewer to experience the film and produce meaning. In this way, cinema remains a space where reality can be transposed into a film through symbols that can take on meaning. Ultimately, a film fulfils its function when it is experienced, understood, and felt by the viewer.

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