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## FILM AND LANGUAGE

**Abstract:** The author discusses, from the perspective of a professional in the field of television and documentary, the key elements of the audiovisual language. The author uses analytical tools from media practice such as the curve of interest or the visual remembrance of space and how the viewer experiences them.

**Key words:** audiovisual language, the curve of interest, visual perception.

“How do images acquire meaning? Do the visual messages use a specific language? If so, what is this language, what are the units he is made of... by what is this language different from the verbal language?”

Roland Barthes, *Rhétorique de l'image*

Paraphrasing this citation from Barthes, we have to put the same question and ask: How does a succession of images (frames) acquire meaning?<sup>1</sup> These specific audio-visual messages, specific to film, are using a specific language? And if so, what is this language, how was it built and what features does it have?

Looking back in time, we must remember the first attempts made by the Lumière brothers in cinema making<sup>2</sup>. These new inventions were used mainly in terms of the industrialization and the mass production type of theatrical performances. Using the film camera, the scene production of the on-stage-actor was replaced with a virtual product, one that could be multiplied, one that would

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- 1 The frame is a continuous recording on a medium made cameras.
  - 2 The brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière are considered the inventors of the first film projection equipment.

radically change the level of audience and financial costs of creating a show.

Basically, those years of pioneering, representative for the history of cinema and illustrated by productions made by the French director Georges Méliès<sup>3</sup>, although founded in the absolute novelty of optical projection, saw no innovations in the visual language of cinematic expression.

The films were actually shot as redesigned theater shows on a screen. What is the difference between the art of the filmed theater and the motion pictures (later affirmed as an independent art by the films made by D.W. Griffith<sup>4</sup>), both defined in terms of cinematic representations projected on a surface?

When and how did the cinema become a specific art, autonomous, with its own language, different from that of the theater?

One answer comes from the critic and film theorist Bela Balasz (1957) who, in the paper entitled "Art of cinema" started from the basic principles of theater (from the point of view of visual perception conditions), identified the ways in which cinema has continued and modified these principles.

So following Balasz, *the first condition* of perception of the typical theatrical performance is the fact that the *viewer sees the space entirely*, the scene in which

the action takes place. From the fixed seats of the theaters, the viewer is always monitoring the entire space of the stage. The innovation of the camera in motion pictures was to bring the technical possibility to select, with an unlimited mobility, any detail of a scene. More so, the cinematic technique allowed the process of recomposing later a broad overview, from a succession of details, in an infinity of combinative solutions (the editing).

A *second condition* to view typical theatrical representation is given by the fixed distance between the viewer and the stage, determined by the way he sees the stage. By the freedom of movement which the camera brings in the motion pictures, there are no more limits and thus, in the same scene, the distance between audience and stage varies, implying thus varying the frame size and the image composition.

The *third condition* specific to theater spectatorship comes from the angle of viewing, which is *fixed and unique as a perspective*, from the point of view of the reception of the action. The film generates here a series of optimizations, which allows changing the viewpoint and the perspective of the images, in many ways within the same scene, but also throughout the film.

Viewed from the perspective of this interpretations we can say that theater can be evaluated as a single frame film, fixed as shot size and angle. (The theatrical plays can have multiple "frames" only if the piece has several acts.)

Besides these elements listed above, the cinema brings the optimization in

3 Georges Méliès, the first French filmmaker.

4 David Wark Griffith, American director, is one of the most important directors in film history. He made about 500 films such as: *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916).

the diversity and the number of "acts" of the performance. By the operation of "assembling" and editing, which is basically able to "stick" in a succession the frames of a sequence, we make up virtually an unlimited possibilities in the number of acts we can build. But editing is not limited to this, because, as it was proven by Griffith and the other pioneers of cinema, (of which it must be mentioned the representatives of the "Soviet School"<sup>5</sup>), *editing* comes with this ability to juxtapose "scenes ", "acts", and "frames" in order to create *rhythm, movement, signification and ideas*.

"Two films that were perfectly identical action, they play the same but have different installation will be the expression of two different personalities and they represent two different images of the subject."

Bela Balasz, *Art of cinema*.

These changes in the reference points of the reception in the theatrical performance brought by the innovations of the motion pictures, created the premise for the appearance and the affirmation of a new type of visual communication, with an autonomous code and a language and with particular forms of expression.

In the theater, the scene is viewed from a fixed point and from a fixed distance and the action takes place on a limited area. In this case we follow it without having to move our head or our body. It

is an artificial position in relation to what happens in real life, on the street or in any type of community activity. Man is in a permanent move, a movement in which he moves his attention successively, in several directions. Thus, in order to pass from one object to another, sometimes it's enough simply to move our eyeballs or our heads. In other cases the body is moving towards a certain point, depending on the need to see an object or event from a distance or closer. It is an instinctual reaction, that of attraction (or rejection), generated by certain stimuli around us and the need to be placed always in that place from which the action is revealed as we expected. In front of a tragic event, for example, the curious crowd gathers at the point where that tragedy is best seen.

In a three-dimensional space the human being finds it impossible to see the whole, since we are limited by the angle (about 120 degrees) of the visual field. To perceive all we have to rotate the head, to move our body, to get closer or move further away. At each station point we can only see a fragment. The whole image is formed mentally by the association and the overlapping of various parts in our memory, of the fragments that we have seen in turn.

To illustrate the process, we must recall the experience of the space we have after a visit in a certain place, and then try to analyze how the visit has remained etched in our visual memory. Use this as a practical exercise.

We visit a village. At first we are impressed by a building, a house with a special architecture. As we advance, our

5 Film-School-current Soviet cinema from the early 20th century mainly represented by directors Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kulesov, S. Pudovkin

attention moves and retains some details: a flower, portrait of a person on the street, etc. Although our visit lasted a few minutes, our memory only remembers the fragments mentioned above, which are placed in a certain sequence. The real experience was translated into the memory as story in a "movie", consisting of the sequenced fragments, that our attention has "cut" from whole, being "challenged" by the visual stimuli.

The cinema and television are actually forms on which we build, on different supports, virtual replicas of the real elements around us.

Based on the same kind of psychological mechanism, the audio-visual discourse of cinema is constructed by recomposing, in an editing operation, in a certain sequence of frames, those parts considered emblematic of that space.

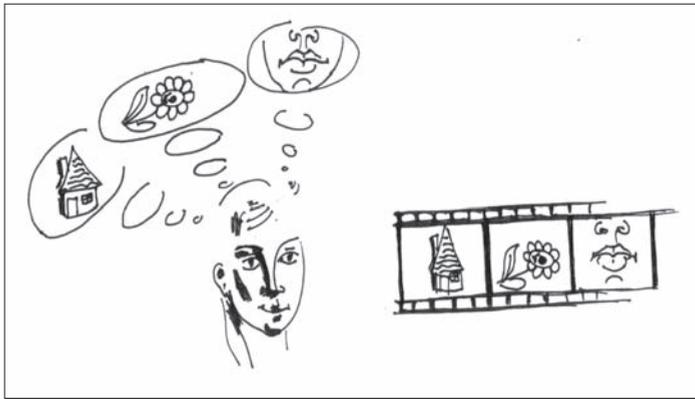


Fig. 1. Fragmentation in "frames"

"The main psychological justification of the audio-visual product, as a form of representing the physical world around us, is that it reproduces this mental process, by which a visual image succeeds another, as our attention is attracted by a point or another in the environment surrounding us".

(A.G. Obrocea, 1987)

Another element that completes the psychological component of the audio-visual language previously identified, is the psychological effect generated to the viewer through the reception of the audiovisual product. This effect is described by B. Balasz as *identification* and it has not resulted naturally in another art,

or in another act of communication and it represents the deepest specificity of the language of the audio-visual product.

"By watching the movie, we will not have the freedom to watch what we want, at random, but the eye will be led in those details cut from reality by the producer, in the order proposed by the editing. My gaze is directed towards the action and inside the space of the image."

Thus it is created a shift in the consciousness of the spectator, from the interior universe into the universe of the film, inside the stage, surrounded by the key figures of the action. From this position, as part of the invisible action,

from the immanent shadow of characters that move in the film, the viewer takes feelings, emotions, their moods. "I, as spectator, can see exactly what they see. My eyes and, implicitly, my conscience identify with the characters in the action. I see from their point of view, I do not have one of my own. I move, live, feel with the characters, I am with them. When the characters look each other in the eyes, they look at me. My eye is actually in the camera and identifies with the look of the characters. In turn, they look at me. It is the act of *mental identification*." (Bela Balasz, 1957).

In a familiar way, assessing this type of effect is done when we say, for example when we are watching a movie: "The action of the film caught me, I did not realize how time has passed by because the film kept me aghast, and I actually forgot about myself...!"

An analytical exercise is used in the media practice in order to draw the curve of interest. The curve of interest is a graph that points to the level of interest, attention and attraction of the spectators when watching the audiovisual product. The exercise highlights the maximum and minimum points, increases and drops carefully, but also the general dynamics

of the level of interest and thus the level of participation in the proposed story of the movie. This curve of interest is actually the level of psychological effect, in a graphic transposition of the identification.

In a communicational approach there was another observation which was made both about cinema and television, considered forms of escaping from this reality, in an imaginary present, a need "to get lost, let yourself go, to be caught" in the imaginary. As Denis McQuail says, this process is composed of a series of complex phenomena, with features that are related to the anticipation, involvement and emotional stimulation. "The essence of this feeling is that the viewer is released from the immediate constraints or the routines of everyday life and helps him to go through some experiences that would not otherwise have been accessible, but in the imagination." McQuail's attention is obviously directed towards the relationship between spectator and the informational reward, the motivation of the spectator being a support in the developing the cultural reward versus the informational reward and not the psychological phenomena associated with the audiovisual reception of the messages.

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