

ELEMENTS OF CINEMATIC CREATION. OBJECT IMAGE AND CHARACTER ANTHROPOMORPHIZATION

Alexandru STERIAN

I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *In cinema, the act of creation is closely related to the visual message. This paper presentation exposes the connection between sign and creation with eloquent examples from Romanian and international feature films. The symbols and signs used for the film composition transfer emotions and feelings to the viewers, mechanisms which depend on the specific norms of perception. A major part of these rules of visual perception are adapted to maximise the message as the basis of the narrative construction of the movie. The level of empathic involvement of the movie audience is manageable through emotional triggers, a cumulative structure of sensations and cultural norms projected on the big screen. The art of film uses the actor, the human body and its expressivity, as one of the most important aesthetic signs. For this reason, composition (framing, focal length, lens depth of field and contrast ratio), lighting, and colours, are elements that help build the mood of the shot or the entire scene. The emotions and sensations experienced in the cinema are unusual, uncommon, and the narrative space developed by all four dimensions simultaneously present in the projection (Euclidian three-dimensional structure of the screened picture, and the fourth dimension, time) are in a state of continuous mutual reliance. Creating the scene mood is indissolubly connected to the level of empathy of the viewers; depending on the narrative structure (the movie genre) certain stylistic and compositional approaches are possible.*

The atmosphere of the shots mediates the experience of emotion; its construction and its consistency are dependent on the message and the length of the scene. Due to the fact that emotion is evoked through a “network” of associative stimuli, within the cumulatively built visual structure, we can identify a gallery of clues: the character’s facial expression, the movement of the camera and the actor, vocal expression, costumes, set design, lighting, shooting list, and editing. As the main tool of communicating the message, the camera, through its point of view, the distance, movement, and optical properties of the medium (frame ratio and shooting format), contribute to the precise construction of the mood, moderating the viewer’s reactions. The narrative structure and the shot sequence dose the audience’s emotional response, the intensity of stimuli depending on the mood created for each shot/movie scene.

The objectives of creation, although vague and diffuse when conceptualising the shot/scene, are made concrete by having as a binder the aesthetic experience of viewing the final result. The analysis of the creative stages begins with the elaboration of the visual concept, at which point the stylistic references in the fields related to the film (music, painting, photography, video-art, etc.) are incorporated into what becomes the visual key of the film.

Keywords: *creativity, image-object, anthropomorphic universe, sign image, symbol image*

Object image, ontological reference of the mental image

In the construction of the filmic universe, the transfer of *Sign* information into *Index* structure, and its conversion to *Symbol*, represents the natural sequence so that the object image (its concrete, three-dimensional structure projected on a two-dimensional surface) is transformed into a connotative, symbolic expression.

The signified is thus configured into proscenium reality through accents and derivations of the figure-background ratio. The

naturalistic, expressive, or symbolic key, is modulated through the fundamental structures of visual grammar; composition, illumination, and colour, are some elements of this construction. To structure the visual message, a first approach is the reconfiguration of the stage space; in this endeavour, technical artifice can be used to illustrate an expressive relationship between the character and the volumes present in the composition. A conclusive example is the approach to this relationship in “Citizen Kane”, where the figure-background ratio is in a continuous reconfiguration in direct relation to the narrative thread and the evolution of the character. The expressive ratio that the character filmed in low-angle shot compositions conveys to the viewer, is based on resizing these ratios through the camera’s position and the focal length of the lens. Thus, ceilings or certain set design elements (windows or furnishings) presented in comparison with Kane, confirm this relationship of domination-subordination that becomes concrete and discernible, by evaluating the compositional load between the character and the set.

The ontological structure of cinema in the causal space-time relationship has been probed and manipulated into subtle forms throughout the history of the seventh art. The synchronous and one-way passing of cinematic time becomes an immutable dimension, sporadically influenced by the reconfiguration of frame rates (high speed or time lapse), accents through which a new paradigm is introduced into the perception of filmic space, a detailed description of the rendered phenomenon (high speed) or highlighting the accelerated passage of time (time lapse). Subtle manipulation of the space-time binomial, through cutting and editing, is the artifice introduced into the cinematic narrative as an element of language. After the release of “Citizen Kane”, the continuous shot technique facilitated the perception of the simultaneity of the cinematographic time illustrated on screen, in direct comparison with the real one, experienced in the cinema hall. This suggestion of continuity of action by illustrating a continuous shot throughout the film (e.g.,

“1917”, directed by Sam Mendes) introduces a new assessment of the structure of the visual language. Although linear and simultaneous passage of time is present in such approaches, the perception of time is accelerated by distorting the relationship of continuous real-time flow, as opposed to the filmic illustration (in “1917”, during the two-hour period of the film, the character crosses several moments of the day, afternoon, dusk, evening, and night).

A different approach in assessing the action and simultaneity of space-time is temporal reversibility and its illustration in the narrative structure of “Memento”, directed by Christopher Nolan. This conditional overlap is visually contradicted by suggestions of temporal “destructuring”, present punctually in the film’s diegesis. The artifice used in the opening title scene completely involves the viewer in the norm of the narrative, a reversible flash-back structure, whereby details about the mental state of the protagonist are presented from the beginning of the movie. The dissolution of the concrete support of an image is represented by the reverse shooting of the process by revealing reality captured in a snapshot. The Polaroid, which becomes the support of the demonstration, is rendered in reverse, in order for the result in the projection to be the disappearance of the captured image; the ontological, concrete support of “reality” is cancelled⁶⁴. This narrative reading key clarifies the denial of the temporal simultaneity logic in the film and describes the mental state of the character in an expressive visual key. For Christopher Nolan, the experiment of this contiguity continues in “Inception” where he reformulates the elasticity of time as an introspective reference in the main character’s memory layers.

The narrative, or narrative space, is defined by the relationship between *signified* (or signs) and *signifier* (symbolic value of the sign). The first step of this structure is that of the mimetic representation (by analogy) of the object image, where the

⁶⁴ See Photos 1 and 2 of Annex

configuration and ontological ratios captured by the camera become the visual medium for the development of later meanings and significances. The prevalence of the concrete, in the case of the medium used for shooting “The Stone Wedding” and the suspicion of the volatility of the real in the structure of the digital image, has an important significance for the act of creation. Potential subsequent interventions on the structure of the “object image”, an action mediated by the fluidity of the medium, disqualify the accents that the viewer discovers in the projected form of the image. As Vilém Flusser states, “Images are significant surfaces. In most cases, they signify something “out there”, and are meant to render that thing imaginable for us, by abstracting it, by reducing its four dimensions of space-plus-time to the two dimensions of a plane. The specific capacity to abstract planes from the space-time “out there”, and to re-project this abstraction back “out-there” might be called “imagination”⁶⁵.

We are witnessing a dichotomous approach to meaning and significance in terms of content, having as a reference the norms of cultural meanings present through simulated spaces (figurative or non-figurative representations in painting and sculpture) or simulations of virtual spaces of current AR or VR image galleries. This necessity to “anchor” the visual discourse of the immediate, concrete references present in the cultural and social space is hit by the ambiguity of the symbolic use of simulation (narrative), or simulacrum (form without content) in the structure of the “unreality” of the digital image. In this respect, the scenographic space can be assimilated by means of its simulacrum in a museum or gallery where the inconsistency and superficiality of the message can determine the appearance of visual oxymorons, very active in the current media culture. Thus, the infusion of conventions and parasitic

⁶⁵ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, European Photography, 1984, p. 6

meanings is the new norm in the audio-visual cultural space. The massification of the artistic message present in the structures of modern museums is transferred to the act of creation, where the convergence and simultaneity of intentions are no longer the basis of the construction of the visual message. “An order of prior simulacra (that of meaning) furnishes the empty substance of a subsequent order, which, itself, no longer even knows the distinction between signifier and signified, nor between form and content”⁶⁶. The fragile demarcation of the boundary of simulation and simulacrum is contained in the “realities” of digital technology, where ontological support of the image is lacking. The constellation of appendices attached to a digital medium entirely conceals the intentions prior to the act of creation and the presence of the concrete support of the sources for conceiving the visual approach.

The symbols, which in the sequence of signs contained in the film composition, are transferred to the spectator, conform to the rules specific to semiotics. An important part of these rules, in direct relation to the norms of visual perception, are adapted to maximize the message as the basis of the film’s narrative construction.

The degree of empathic involvement of the film viewer is controllable by means of the so-called emotional triggers, a cumulative structure of organised sensations, graduated by means of editing, visual stylistics, and aesthetic signs present in the composition.

The dissolution of the structural elements of the signified in the ideational convention of the signifier occurs at the moment of reinterpretation of the narrative space, reconfiguration fuelled by symbolic suggestions and interventions (cultural, aesthetic) through which the viewer deciphers the narrative plans and layers. The contiguity of these planes (of signified and signifier) is essential for

⁶⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Sheila Faria Glaser, Trans.), Ann Arbor The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 45

structuring the narrative space within which the compositional elements made up of object-images are structurally reconfigured through the phonemes of visual language. Important details or elements of the composition, in direct connection with the action and the actors involved, are recomposed as a mental image of the mimetic structure of the signified. This projection may be transferred, in part or in full, to the relevant structure of the signifier. The double significance of the “projection”, the transfer of the object image into the mental image, and the mechanism of image projection on the cinema screen, lead us to the need to reflect in front of compositional content. These durations of the assessment of meanings, or of the “punctum” in Roland Barthes’s approach, are available to the spectator and to the director in the two forms of illustration, photography, and cinema. Thus, the possibility of day-dreaming in the mechanism of imagination triggered by the image acts differently in the cinema versus the art gallery. In this regard, Barthes declares: “Do I add to the images in movies? I don’t think so; I don’t have time: in front of the screen, I’m not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to continuous voracity; a host of other qualities, but not *pensiveness*; whence the interest, for me, of the photogram (photography).”⁶⁷

Anthropomorphization of the character in the stage space of the interior of “The Stone Wedding”

From the first shot⁶⁸ of the interior scene in “The Stone Wedding”, Mircea Veroiu declares his intention to anthropomorphise the captive daughter’s character in an object space, a transfer resulting from the hierarchy of compositional graphic elements. The minimalist appearance of the image is subject to the rules of Notan

⁶⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography* (Richard Howard, Trans), Hill and Wang, New York, 1982, p. 55

⁶⁸ See Photo 3 of Annex

graphics where, through the ratios of negative-positive spaces and tonal balance, a space dominated by symbols and meanings is constructed. The positive and negative compositional surface is balanced in favour of the “animated” objects that dominate the interior of the house in relation to the characters. Symmetry and tonal balance are used to contradict academic norms in an attempt to convey the sense of emptiness and alienation present in the mother-daughter relationship. Gestures are minimal and the economy of means, in terms of stage movement and cut-out, is approached to mediate the transfer of the apparent mobility of the anthropomorphic universe in opposition to the obvious immobility of the characters. Texture is invoked as a means of transferring desires by enlivening dolls as a reference to the relationship between the characters, or by illustrating the graphic structure and density of objects present in the kitchen space. In the tonal harmony of the kitchen, the prevalence of dense objects is in counterpoint with two elements, the glass of milk and the lamp suspended above the table⁶⁹. With the exception of the white walls, the two elements are constant presences in the composition to introduce a symbolic, spiritual relationship, which is confirmed to us later in the film diegesis⁷⁰.

The overlapping frames in which the girl’s character is captive, evolves from the negative space of the chair seat back to the frontal point of view of the doors and windows of the house in which the character is framed⁷¹. Right from the first shot of the movie (the pair of painted clay figurines placed next to the window), the director reiterates the message of visual tracing of strictly defined limits, the frame-in-frame composition becomes a leitmotif of the first part of “The Stone Wedding”, and the destiny of the two characters is confirmed by this limitation of their freedom. Outside the house we discover the same symbolic transfer of the character’s inability to

⁶⁹ See Photo 4 of Annex

⁷⁰ See Photo 5 of Annex

⁷¹ See Photos 6, 7, and 8 of Annex

free herself from the subtle fabric of destiny when the gate frame visually reiterates this record.

Through the frontal perspective of the compositions, the viewer is induced into a sense of theatricality, a convention confirmed by the heterogeneous organisation of the acting space. This type of sometimes eclectic treatment of both the interior and exterior, underlines the director's desire to convey the alienation of the girl, a character surrounded by objects with "hidden" or obscure meanings in the rural universe of Roşia Montană.

The movie set is built around a nodal space (kitchen)⁷², where we discover some potential freedom enclaves, an illusory escape that the creators use to deny the girl's possible escape from the closed universe of the house. Compositions in which frames are present, as a confirmation of captivity, are also witnesses of a similar relationship in the outer space where the figure-background ratio is subordinated to the same structure. The perspective, texture, and relevance of the backgrounds, are built to fulfil the protagonist's destiny, sentenced to a life without prospects, trapped in an uncontrollable universe. Although, from the camera's perspective, the horizon line should be included in the exterior compositions, this demarcation between earth and sky is not present in many spaces in the film. In addition to the interiors and the gold mining quarry, even the streets of the village do not benefit from the symbolic contribution of the "opening", caused by the presence of the sky in the frame. In some cases, this pseudo-opening is revealed by a hybridisation of the backgrounds, a false illustration of the sky, substituted by the lake mirror surface present next to the house. The suggestion is introduced in the exterior shots in which the girl participates in the daily ritual of walking on the lake shore, a space where the figure of the girl is evaluated in a graphic, silhouette representation. This approach certifies the intention of creators to

⁷² See Photos 9 and 10 of Annex

continue the figure-background subordination ratio present in all interior compositions. The same minimalist, narrow structure, in which white and black coexist in precise, well-defined ratios.

The spatial relationship between the characters and the background is not adjusted, the projection and relevance of depth is transmitted though the same care to compose in closed perspectives or in successive frames (the pub and the wedding shop) but the ratio and projection of the characters on these backgrounds remains unchanged. The feeling of captivity in the space that generates the tragedy is also obvious in the compositions in which we find Maria in the middle of the village, a space also rendered in perspectives without openness and without a “horizon”. Character dynamics in this context are minimized by the use of the zoom lens, an optical “movement” through which the relationship of distance and figure-background evaluation ratio is distorted. The continuous shot in which Maria decides to give up her last connections with the concrete, real world of her native village, is achieved by compensating the character’s movement through zooming and the travelling movement. The square where we see her for the last time is the *in extenso* expression of the house, a space from which the only escape is the passage into the realm of shadows, a step for which she prepares with resignation.

Atmosphere and emotion

The atmosphere of the shots within a sequence becomes the vehicle for grading the emotion, its construction and consistency are dependent on the structure of the message and on the duration of each composition. Because emotion is graded through a “network” of associative stimuli, within a cumulatively constructed visual structure, we are presented with a gallery of clues that include: facial expression and movement of the actor, vocal expression and tone, costumes, set design, lighting, shot list, editing and, last but not least, camera angle; point of view and shooting angle, distance/proximity

of the action plane, movement, ontological properties of the environment (textures, depth of field, granulation), all these elements contribute to the punctual construction of the atmosphere by dosing or directing the viewer's reactions. The narrative structure and the cut-out build and grade the viewer's emotional response; the intensity of the response to these stimuli depends on the mood created in each of the frames/sequences. The relevance of the format, photographic or cinematographic, is decisive in this respect due to the contribution of the temporal dimension present in the case of cinema, this component limits the assessment of compositional indices by the spectator in the fixed durations of each frame. The consistency with which the viewer can examine and decipher the compositional structure in a photography no longer applies to a movie shot or scene where the durations of the action are counted and graduated by means of the editing. The value of the narrative time is that decided during editing or by means of the staging the action and camera, in the case of the one shot scene. Identification and evaluation of relevant elements of the composition are constrained by using the visual clues, including the exponents of the densities and brightness which, in the first part of "The Stone Wedding", fall within the rules of the Notan graphics, where the surfaces have distinct densities of White, Grey and Black⁷³.

In direct relation to the harmony or de-balancing of individual shots, additional compositional spaces are used to induce the viewer with a feeling of imbalance, restlessness. In the unique relationship with each of the characters, this ratio, subordinated to the 1:1,375 film format, is very easily configured in the structure desired by the two creators, which leads to intentional "non-academic" compositions. Thus, the interior acquires a separate relevance in the visual structure of the first part of the movie, the message is transmitted through the obviously unbalanced spacing

⁷³ See Photo 11 of Annex

and disharmonious compositional ratios, which highlight the relationship between mother and daughter in the intimate, private space of the house.

To sum up, cinematic creation can be defined as a way to transfer the literary codes of written language into visual and sound clues (audio-visual language). The transfer is accomplished by a mechanical recording of the space and actions present in front of the camera lens. In a broader sense, the presence of the actor, or the protagonist, in front of the camera transfers on the recording medium, in the broad norms of Platonic *techne*, the object image in the codes specific to the art of filmmaking. The spoken messages, the dialogues, or transferred into visual language, the compositions, are interpreted cumulatively in the context of the reinterpretation of a spatial reality (the movie set in which they are shot), expressive, symbolic or truthful/mimetic representation of an explicit, real space. This photographic reality, which Roland Barthes cites as a first filter of narrative verisimilitude, is a space reconfigured in the direction desired by the creators. The proscenic space of the moment of capture is subject to their will and stylistic intentions. The director and the cinematographer decide what subtle or radical visual language grammar interventions they will involve in the narrative structure, elements that the viewer uses in decoding the message.

References

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Annex of Photographs and Film Stills

Photo 1: Background credits of “Memento”, the beginning of the shot with the full picture



Photo 2: The end of the shot the faded image disappears completely from the Polaroid



Photo 3: The first shot of “The Stone Wedding”



Photo 4: The kitchen in a broad lighting ratio. We note the lamp and the glass of milk as unique dissonant elements in the gallery of densities of objects in the shot



Photo 5: Details captured in the only top shot in the first part of the movie “The Stone Wedding”, are evaluated comparatively in the space dominated by dense objects. The lamp and the porcelain soup bowl, both endowed with symbolic references.



Photo 6: A “frame in frame” composition, frequently used in the interior of “The Stone Wedding”



Photo 7: The interior-exterior relationship mediated by the same compositional “restrictions”, frames and reflections



Photo 8: The prolonging of the visual “restrictions” and limitations within the house, the character is enclosed within the door frame



Photo 9: The main shooting direction in the interior kitchen, the tonal ratio is compressed



Photo 10: The kitchen on the entrance direction, the heterogenous aspect of the space is highlighted by the mixture of furniture with different functions.



Photo 11: Illustration of the use of negative/positive space in a composition. A graphic approach of composition



Alexandru Sterian is the current International Affairs and Erasmus+ Vice-Rector at UNATC “I.L. Caragiale”, Associate Professor and Tenured Professor at the same university, where he teaches “Film Image and TV” at Bachelor and Master level, as well as courses in Digital Image, Postproduction and Technique and Film Technology at Master Directing, Image, and Production. In 2018 he completed the habilitation thesis at UNATC IL Caragiale and since 2020 is a member of UNATC’s Doctoral University Studies Board.

For more than 25 years, he has been Director of Photography, cinematographer for several feature films selected at prestigious film festivals: Cannes, Berlin, Locarno, Clermont Ferrand, Florida, Miami, Cottbus or Valencia.

He is also the author of three film books and co-author of a collective volume:

2016 – Influences of New Media in the Aesthetics of Fiction Film, UNATC Press, ISBN 978-973-1790-98-5791.43-2

2017 – Cinematic Composition, Movement, UNATC Press, ISBN 978-606-8757-13-1791

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2020 – Chapter “The Blair Witch Project and the Mockumentary Approach” in the collective volume Magic and Witchcraft Historical, Anthropological and Artistic Perspectives, Mega, Cluj-Napoca, ISBN 978-606-020-245-5

Last but not least, Alexandru Sterian is the President of the Romanian Society of Cinematographers since 2000 and, between 2018-2020, Member of the Film Commission responsible for the Tax Incentives program of the Romanian Government. E-mail: alex.sterian@unatc.ro