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## LINGUISTIC APPROACHES IN FILM-THEORY: A MOVEMENT AGAINST FILM LANGUAGE

**Introduction.** *The correctness of “film language” concept as the most common designation of specific cinematographic techniques is questioned since it caused the formation of typical audience responses to a film.*

**Materials and methods.** *The work proposes to define three basic meanings of the “film language” concept and trace their formation on the basis of classical and modern film theory.*

**Results.** *The main approaches of the film theory focus on an analogies search between cinema and language (linguistic, semiotic). The example of their basic assertions criticism on the basis of a modern Anglo-American film philosophy is given, thus resulting in the conclusion of their theoretical inadequacy.*

**Discussion.** *Possible directions of film theory movement beyond language analogies are outlined. It is proposed to note the film techniques that in principle do not have the designation function. An example of the minimum cinematic elements related to the audio-visual field of the cinema itself is provided. The thesis on changing the typical audience viewing responses from an interpretive “understanding” to a sensual “encounter” is proposed for further discussion.*

**Conclusion.** *It is necessary to continue the theoretical work which refuses linguistic analogies and interpretive position of theorist and viewer and makes movement towards a conversation on the autonomous existence mode of cinematography possible.*

**Key words:** *Film language, audience perception, interpretation.*

**Key words:** Film language, audience perception, interpretation, communication, semiotics, post-theory, C. Metz, G. Deleuze, N. Carroll.

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## ЯЗЫКОВЫЕ ПОДХОДЫ В ТЕОРИИ КИНО: ДВИЖЕНИЕ ПРОТИВ КИНОЯЗЫКА

**Введение.** Под вопрос ставится корректность понятия «киноязык» как наиболее распространенного обозначения специфических кинематографических приемов, следствием которого стало формирование определенных зрительских установок в отношении фильма.

**Материалы и методы.** Предлагается определить три основных значения слова «киноязык» и проследить их формирование на материале классической и современной теории кино.

**Результаты исследования.** Излагаются основные кинотеоретические подходы, ориентированные на поиск аналогий между кино и языком (лингвистические, семиотические), приводится пример критики их основных положений на материале современной англо-американской философии кино, делается вывод о его теоретической несостоятельности.

**Обсуждение.** Намечаются возможные направления кинотеоретического движения по ту сторону языковых аналогий. Предлагается обратить внимание на те технические приемы кино, которые принципиально не имеют функции означивания; приводится пример минимальных кинематографических элементов, относящихся к аудиовизуальному полю самого кино; для дальнейшего обсуждения предлагается тезис о смене зрительской установки при просмотре с интерпретирующего «понимания» на чувственное «столкновение».

**Заключение.** Подчеркивается необходимость продолжения теоретической работы, для которой отказ от языковых аналогий и интерпретирующей позиции теоретика и зрителя сделает возможным движение в стороны разговора об автономном режиме существования кино.

**Ключевые слова:** киноязык, зрительское восприятие, интерпретация, коммуникация, семиотика, пост-теория, К. Метц, Ж. Делез, Н. Кэрролл.

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**Introduction.** Obviously, a work raises legitimate doubts when its pathos is based on a desire to disprove something. A proposal of “negative programs” primarily manifesting a movement against something can correctly be accused of incompleteness. The proclamation of a negative statement requires a subsequent positive alternative. At the same time, it is no less obvious that the proposal of a new approach is possible only when it is consistent with existing ones, and thus, a thorough analysis of a theoretical field, search for its inherent problems and comments on relevant issues are a starting point of any research.

A polemic raised in this article belongs to a film-theory field and stems from the negative statement. It can be formulated as a “movement against film language”, which is one of the most common concepts of a classical and modern theory and philosophy of film. Of course, behind a war against the concept lies not so much an interest in words as in a type of interaction with a film since it is expressed by them. Considering a film as a language is not just marginal note that could be ignored while confidently offering other moves. It can be called a dominant, main line of thought about film composition, existence, and perception. Disagreement with film language as a concept, therefore, means not only an argument about words, but discussion of a whole ideas system that is obsessively reproduced by most of theoretical and philosophical approaches to cinema.

A reassessment of this kind requires a disposition explanation (what sense is the film language?), analysis of current polemics (what theories discourse about film language?), and finally, formulation of its own negative program where can be seen a movement to a positive one.

**Materials and methods.** First of all, it is necessary to clearly understand what is meant by the term “film language” in the theory and philosophy of film, since its widespread use changed a formerly strict analogy that required conversation about film grammar, syntax and vocabulary, into an extremely vague one. The word “film language” came into use by those writing about cinema long before an emergence of theories that questioned methodological aspects of a new media language specificity. The “film language” concept quickly turned into a cliché and was used as a synonym for “cinema” even in the texts of those directors who insisted on exclusive audiovisual character of a cinema and differentiated it from a human communication as it has nothing in common with writing and reading processes (J. Epstein [1, p. 315], D. Vertov [2, p. 137]). This spontaneously established term has several meanings at a level of self-understanding. Firstly, the film language is understood as a set of techniques (filming, editing) presented in a film. In case the film language is individualized, then this term can be applied to techniques that are actively used (invented) by a particular director or genre. During the years of fascination with structural approaches to a cinema there was a way of making analogies so that cinema was endowed with its own inherent language and its director, who chose the film necessary elements creating a certain style, was called a native speaker [3]. Secondly, besides a quantitative collection of filming techniques, "film language" has other connotations, which not only simply connote something in a film, but define viewers perceptions. A semiotic paradigm based on the Saussure's division into signifier and signified always considers at least two film levels. The first level is the level of surfaces, i.e. signifier, frames and their combinations. The second level is the level of depth, i.e. signified, which is a meaning that can be "read out" from these combinations. The "film language" hints that a film, same as speech and writing, is never just a combination of sounds and graphic signs, but rather a certain meaning behind the combinations, which viewer, same as reader, needs to clearly understand. In case a formal film structure opposes a notation that can be subtracted, still the interpretation can be made at a level of signifier prescribing a certain film meaning. This strategy is common to an experimental film analysis that turns out to be enclosed into a constructed narrative despite its opposition to a notation at a structure level. Finally, thirdly, an endowment of a film with a language implies an utterance process when someone (in different traditions it can be a film itself, director, or someone/something in a film) transmits something to a viewer. Viewing, therefore, appears as an act of communication. The conclusion is simple: it is necessary to restrain all three of these meanings in order to successfully fight the film language. A targeted criticism of one meaning cannot be automatically transferred to others, hence, it cannot make a compelling fight against language approaches to cinema. An example of such unidirectional criticism is given further and its obvious failure should serve as a lesson for those who do not quit trying to convince the film-theory to abandon ideas about a productivity of language analogies.

**Results.** The provocative nature of this negative program is determined by a fact that making statements against the film language means an engagement in an active controversy with the XX century fundamental methodological tradition based on a fact that cinema is structured

as a language. It is clear that such a statement is made on the basis of quite specific philosophical principles, which are beyond the scope of the present work. Note however that methodologies, which are forming the film-theory under an influence of these principles, developed in several stages. There was a radical linguistic proposal not typical for the film-theory insisting on a possibility of carrying out a direct analogy between film and language (M. Adler). It was followed by a semiotic proposal, which was away from equalization but supposed a system of specific codes underlying the basis of cinematographic images. This proposal was more widespread, mainly because it considered specifics of the studied matter when constructing various forms and structures. The first (strong) analogy between film and language was quickly discredited from a point of view of formal rigor due to a double division lack in a cinema and, therefore, lack of basic units ensuring a natural language functioning. The codes system proposed by semiotics is a less radical alternative, which suggests that a viewer learns certain conventions and rules when watching a film, and acquired knowledge allows this viewer to easily read the images shown on a screen. However, this approach was not too far away from the natural language analogy and from a process of watching a film with some reading. Anyway, a discussion continued to be either around language structures inherent to cinema (metaphor and metonymy, syntagm and paradigm by Metz [4]), or around specific film codes that a viewer inevitably learns while watching a film (U. Eco [5], J. Aumont [6]).

The proposed criticism is not new. For example, J. Deleuze's polemic has similar approaches [7, pp. 275–281]. However, the most elaborated resistance to language analogies was the American post-theory. The negative post-theory program became one movement in the mid-1990s and was directed not only against semiotic approaches, but against the film-theory based on the continental philosophy (psychoanalysis, neo-Marxism, semiotics, and post-structuralism) as a whole. Instead, the main representatives of the post-theory (N. Carroll, D. Bordwell, G. Currie) proposed alternative methodologies allowing film discussions, namely narratology and cognitive psychology. The framework of this article cannot allow detailed analysis of post-theory formation stages and its steps. However, it is important to emphasize that one of the main post-theorists tasks to correct mistakes was a need to deal with ideas of considering a film as a language. Note, in author's opinion, this attempt can hardly be considered successful, since alternative approach philosophical principles are no less controversial and, moreover, not achieving the goal.

First of all, post-theorists focus attention on how exactly film techniques formation takes place and what opens viewer access to an understanding of their role in a narrative formation. The question is if strict analogies between film and language structures possible. The criticism, therefore, deals mainly with the first understanding of a film language among mentioned before. And since in the post-theory with its predictable cognitive focus on a perception act, a viewer is the most important criterion of a (dis)similarity, then the discussion can be reduced to the following question: does a viewer need a preliminary training before viewing and, if so, what kind of training is this? All film language theorists (linguistic, semiotic), therefore, are referred to as conventionalists claiming that a cinema develops its own techniques in accordance with its internal grammar, which a viewer must know in order to understand at least something from what he perceives.

The post-theory enters discussion with this statement, but its following argumentation based on cognitive processes studies often replaces the statement and disproves other position instead of an initial one. N. Carroll's works tell about a process of single frames reading. He strongly believes that universal cognitive and psychological processes are a perception foundation, and *recognition* is a film reception basis. The recognition process is associated with an ability to select out of an image objects, which correspond to everyday experience objects and, thus, understand what is depicted on the screen “without additional trainings and instructions” [8, p. 18]. His main argument against film as a codes system is empirical studies of viewers perception among different cultures representatives, many of whom were not familiar with cinema before. The data used by Carroll show that perception of what is shown on a screen does not cause difficulties for viewers regardless of an accumulated experience and, therefore, it does not require the preliminary training. On this issue, most modern theorists make statements identical to each other leaning on general argumentation methods and explanations system given by the cognitive approach [9, pp. 113–137], [10, pp. 51–97]. From this perspective, difficulties in the actual recognition of an object can be associated solely with a lack of familiarity with it in an everyday experience, but not with a failure of the recognition process itself. This allows Carroll to take it as a basic mechanism that gives access to any viewer. Omitting the fact that a history of film study accumulated enough opposite empirical data considering which it is possible to conclude that a film watching process for viewers from different cultures is not unambiguously similar [11, pp. 71–73], the argument of Carroll and his colleagues does not raise big questions, but it seems like it works with a completely different problem. There is a fundamental difference between (not)having difficulties to see a cow on a picture of a cow and (not)having difficulties to understand how frames combining with each other in a sequence, how does this technique forms and works. Carroll's statement could be used with equal success in discussions about painting, photography, and any fine art, but discussions about cinema implies a different research perspective, since it is represented by non-static frames.

From this point, D. Bordwell's position appears to be much closer to the issue, since he relies on techniques instead of frames and tries to find an adequate degree of their conventionality by using the example of a shot/countershot technique<sup>1</sup>. Bordwell notes that the technique of shooting a dialogue when a camera alternately displays close-up of two characters faces was not externally influenced or borrowed from another arts style, or dictated by technical necessity requirement [12, p. 57]. It is something that was born within a film itself according to its internal law. However, the question about convention is a question of how this birth took place. Does it correspond to certain film adaptability to a natural viewers vision? Or was it a random choice in favor of this filming technique that should only be memorized by both director and viewers as a grammatical rule? According to Bordwell, “random universals” [12, p. 61] form a “film language” and offer understanding of common film techniques as something in between natural perception possibilities and partial “randomness” in a particular case. In accordance with the general narrative paradigm, every film technique has some purpose. Thus, it is a logical

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<sup>1</sup> Shot/countershot technique is the most common film editing technique to shoot a dialogue. In this case a camera is positioned at a certain angle so that after film editing faces of two speakers are shown looking in opposite directions and their eyelines are crossing.

assumption that a character face close-up is filmed to draw attention to a specific emotional state, even though a natural perception cannot provide such opportunities. These goals combine with each other, thus, creating a context defining particular technique uniqueness. Perhaps, we would not understand that alternately shown faces, which are turned in opposite directions, are looking at each other without an accompanying dialogue. Thus, techniques combined in a single narrative lead us to an understanding, and to a necessity to see something beyond what is shown. Hence, the post-theory approach is not far from considering a film as a language.

The criticism of the first understanding of a film as a language turns out to be incapable, and with the second and third meanings the post-theory does not even nominally try to deal with. On the contrary, visual metaphors question remains, and especially about their consideration as a visual reality that can be arranged into one and named, that is so called verbal images and film metaphors. According to Carroll, readers visualize while reading when they are passionate about a text, but a cinema suggests a reverse process, namely “to find words beyond images” [13, p. 187]. Discussion about film metaphors in the post-theory is not based on communication techniques created, for example, by film editing processes (as in semiotics), but on objects captured by a camera. The same problem as in the recognition issue appears: can it really be possible to say that a film work reduces to frames content, and their combination fades into the background? Comparing the post-theory approach with semiotics it is possible to say that from the signifier point of view the first is concerned with a question what frames are connected, and the second – how frames connect. Obviously, the question “how?” pays more attention to a film work without reducing it to a content description of individual frames.

The post-theory avoids radical statements in all its techniques and leaves some interpretation field. It offers a point of view when a “film language” exists in the second and third meanings. This is especially true for the third meaning, since a film is essentially considered by all post-theorists as an act of communication, more specifically, as a story that must be read and perceived by viewers. B. Gaut, for example, directly states that a film must waive rights to its own language due to a grammar and dictionary lack, however, he notes, that even in this case film remains its ability to communicate [9, p. 56]. Perception always refers to a specific value. Gaut is absolutely right that a film should not be studied with a help of a dictionary, there should not be accompanying literature, without which viewers left helpless in front of a shown film. But at the same time, from a point of view of an apparently more productive line of criticism, the post-theory is silent about the fact that viewers are often really helpless in their interpretations when a film goes far away from a narrative structure.

**Discussion.** Of course, many ways can be found to demonstrate the film language approach irrelevance. It is possible to find evidence of a different perspective within a film itself with a help of those who are filming it and know how to put their practice into words, without trying to disprove one philosophical paradigm with the help of another.

In general, it is difficult to ignore the fact that a film itself is partly to blame for language approaches attempts, which constantly try to access it. Unlike music, where apparently problem of meaningful message identification in a symphony appears less often, a cinema long ago set a narrative film as a norm and its narrativity as a simulacrum of a film essential feature, thus, leaving non-narrative films or films with a vague narrative in a status of marginal notes defined through an “experimental film” concept of little significance. Note, the post-theory itself in its

unsuccessful fight against language analogies and the proposal to continue consider a film as a communicative act and a reality, where it is necessary to search for a meaning, states that its conclusions do not apply to this film type. It is impossible to discuss about the objects recognition if these objects simply do not exist (in experimental films by V. Eggeling, W. Ruttmann, N. McLaren). There is obviously impossible to talk about what is happening in the frame, what kind of story unfolds. Other examples are techniques that resist any storytelling to a viewer. Generally, the 180-degree rule is easily reduced to its narrative function when the film editing technique is used to show an ongoing dialogue. However, there are also techniques that are not motivated by any goal and aimless at their core. Without going into radical avant-garde examples, it is possible to remember famous *jump-cuts*<sup>2</sup> of J. L. Godard, for which the film-theory is providing a variety of interpretations (e. g. protest against Hollywood cinema, middle class representative system criticism). However, even if Godard himself would defend them, these interpretations go far beyond film limits and require an external context. Such meaning cannot be considered by a viewer, who does not know how to connect these two aspects in terms of the conventional wisdom. But nevertheless a viewer would feel this technique, and even if a viewer could not notice it, still the fact that there *is* this technique remains.

It is easy to understand an excitement accompanying language theories. As a rule, after the first mention of language analogies, there is a further discussion of elements they deal with, such as minimal film elements and laws of their combinations. Like any theory, the film-theory is puzzled by a minimal elements search in order to build a foundation of its knowledge on them and adapt appearing terms to the existed coordinate system, thus allowing stability. Language in such conditions is a very convenient system, allowing to make a translation. It is a system with its own dictionary and grammar, thus allowing analogies search in a film regardless their names changing. These analogies are connections such as syntagm and paradigm, metaphor and metonymy. At the same time, the film-theory of cinema as if intentionally passes by those elements (e. g. movement, film editing, color, rhythm, etc.) that can actually be found in a film without appealing to language analogies. In fact, considering ways directors speaking about cinema, it becomes obvious how many elements can be distinguished in a constant development of the audio-visual field. For example, considering works of English director Derek Jarman [14], one encounters a striking way to think in film by colours and colour combinations. Of course, with his inherent poetic intonation, he regularly goes to personal memories and associations, but this does not prevent Jarman from thinking and speaking about colours as self-sufficient, essential elements that constitute a film. Yellow is not yellow walls as a metaphor of sadness, but yellow as paint is a mixture of inorganic elements, and a complex of chemical reaction; yellow as a colour is not a secondary object property that makes sense only in the perception act, but yellow is physical laws of a light propagation and its wavelength.

Finally, the last and most important move is a movement against a way we speak about a film, which is based on the fact that understanding is a viewing essence. The understanding transforms an object, adapts it, and translates into its own language. Hence expectations that a

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<sup>2</sup>*Jump-cut* is a false film transition that abruptly breaking a shot continuity. For example, a character in a film frame rides in the front seat of a car. Using jump-cuts violates an illusion of continuity by making film transitions visible due to a combination of film frames with a minimal but noticeable change in an internal structure. Conventional editing would shoot a similar scene without cuts.

film should tell something, and that beyond audible and visible elements lies a conceptual dimension, without which sensuality is supposed to be blind. However, if one stop thinking about a film as an intentions expression of its creator and (or) an artwork with a certain meaning, then a viewer faces a pure sensual reality, which can only be encountered. One can start considering a viewing act not as an understanding act, but as an *encounter* act with something truly different. Paraphrasing Deleuze, for a viewer who is not looking for deceptive simplicity in a process of naming objects appearing on a screen, thus arranging them into cause and effect chains, a new world opens up, which is much more complex and elusive for language approaches: “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. <...> In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed” [15, p. 175]. It is necessary to look for another access point, which differs from a simple translation of a film into our own language, to be able to discuss it.

**Conclusion.** The “film-language” concept inadequacy question must be asked in a context of different conversations: whether we are talking exclusively about the viewer perception incorrectness or about a kind of work that a film does by itself, without any viewer participation and regardless viewer perception. Of course, this conversation cannot be immediately fully expanded. This work focuses on what happens with a viewer, but it is does not mean that conclusion about the encounter is a final point of the reflection. The encounter is a necessary point that is set at the *beginning*, not at the end. It is a viewer/research point of view to begin discussion about a film as an independent object, and from *its own point of view*. The film does not reduces to that semantic overload that is usually attributed to it by analysing its plot, and it is not limited to a task of convincing viewers not to interpret, but to enjoy what they see and hear. It is possible to stop at this conclusion, but it is only an intermediate stage that, first of all, tries to bring a film out of cultural chains and show that a world of meanings, in which it is included by a viewer sitting in front of a screen and theorist describing it, is secondary to a film itself as an independent object, for which its native world is sensual, full of “non-signifying entities” [16, p. 288] and not taking viewer judgments as an existence foundation.

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