

Some Notes on the Basic Unit of the Filmic Language:
A Critique of Christian Metz's *Langage et cinéma* (1971)

The non-linearity and intertextuality of the total cinematic work make its syntagmatic system difficult to represent in a descriptive narrative. Defying this inherent hurdle and disregarding Christian Metz's admonition in his seminal study on filmic language, whereby the author warns that 'one risks missing the real structure of films...[and not seeing] the cinematic language system as a whole...when one insists on finding *the* minimal filmic sign,'¹ this short argumentative essay attempts to identify and define the elusive basic unit of the cinematic language. This is felt necessary, because of the contention that no system may be understood without first recognizing its smallest meaningful building block. Also departing from the accepted vocabulary of most film theorists, the smallest basic cinematic unit will be called a syntagm for the purposes of this essay.

The syntagmatic language of the cinema is induced into action by falling into place. The broad meaningfulness of the image of a suffering face, for instance, is due to its universal intelligibility. However, the more or less expressionless face of a woman with red coloured background or of a foot in the mud carries no independent meaning without its context of associations. At the same time, these unmarked images are connected to the rest of the usually rich image systems making up the internal world of a movie by invisible tentacles that penetrate in all cognitive, sensual and emotional directions and these interconnections endow them with meanings.

The notional movement (motion) of the image systems along these tentacles is not linear in spite of the fact that the work of art begins at some point and ends at another. Non-linearity means omni-directionality; sometimes from the centre outwards, sometimes from the outer (tangential) regions of meaningful perception to the centre, sometimes from infinite numbers of diffuse mini centres towards infinite numbers of other centres or nodes. Rather like the movement of electrons according to the theory of quantum mechanics.

This general osmotic movement of meaning and signification along tentacles, which are like the ganglions of the brain, constitutes, in our interpretation, the syntagmatic system made up of units that pulsate into meaning in cinematic art. The woman's face with little expression may return as the face of a female judge in court whereby the red background may gain a certain signification. The red may re-echo an emotional or political or carnal motive rationalized, contextualized, elsewhere in the same work. The foot in the mud belongs to someone whose relationship with the mud we find out elsewhere. The uncontextualized appearance of the foot at some point in the seemingly linear sequence may be necessary for imparting the totality of the filmmaker's peculiar message.

¹ Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, translated by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok, The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974, pp. 198-99. Emphasis in the original.

The opening scenes of a film, as in Bresson's *Pickpocket*, may in fact be linear for a limited period of time until our associations build up and become directionless or omnidirectional.² In Bela Tarr's films this initial build-up is usually prolonged (as in *The Man from London*, 2007); the viewers' associative learning process becomes extended in time. This does not mean that Tarr's films remain asyntagmatic for long initial sequences. As Metz explains in his sub-chapter entitled 'Distinctive Units: Diversity of Size', some basic units may be drawn out *in extremis*. Therefore, rather than being asyntagmatic, these long sequences (mostly recorded in long takes) in Tarr's world are indivisible syntagms par excellence. Perhaps comparable to giant molecules in chemistry. This is not so, however, in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* where the very first moment evokes independent, extra-filmic associations, both cognitive and emotional. Whatever 'happens' afterwards builds thereon and enriches the syntagms that travel along the ganglions that infiltrate, enmesh, interpenetrate the mental space made available by opening the unique world of each individual filmic work of art, whether of the *Pickpocket* or of *Bicycle Thieves* type. In both categories, perhaps more so in the second type where interpenetration is immediate, the role of sound, if present, is always as important as that of the image.

In *Bicycle Thieves*, the cognitive and emotional connections made between the war-devastated opening scene, accompanied by the painfully mournful and wistful music, make the viewer entirely prepared for the appearance of a character like Antonio Ricci, the protagonist. In fact, we are already waiting for him, his place is ready in the mind and soul. That is, syntagmatic units of filmic communication have already passed through a network of tentacles engendered by the evocations of the opening scene. The evocation depends, counts, on pre-existing cultural tropes, memes or associations that the film does not have to create.³

Some films begin with such primordial human tropes which do not require close cultural familiarity with the context. Such a beginning is afforded in Zhang Yimou's *Red Soghrum* (紅高粱, hong gaoliang) from the novel *Red Soghrum Clan* by Mo Yan. Red is a radiant, vibrating, disquieting colour for all. So are the basic human conditions of subordination, subjugation, incarceration, female-male role contrasts, the roughness of a half-naked male workman, etc.

What is the message that travels along our virtual ganglions, what is the basic unit, the syntagm that constitutes the filmic language? In *Langage et Cinéma* (1971) Christian Metz made perhaps the first serious attempt at defining the minimum cinematic unit as he called it. Approaching the question via Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the dichotomy between *signifié* and *signifiant*, Metz proposes the *Grand Syntagmatique* (a primarily semiotic

² Viewers may experience immediate multiple associations even in cases of such nominally linear beginnings, but that could well happen independently or even in spite of the director's conceptions.

³ This means that any given particular film may not have the same effect or meaning for audiences with radically different cultural backgrounds.

concept) for categorizing scenes (known to him as syntagms) interpreted and rendered under filmic codes and sub-codes.

The problem with this approach in my view is that in order to signify or to be signified an object or person or concept needs and agent and/or an agency in the first place that can carry out the signification. How these agents and agency are created are not addressed in *Langage et cinéma*. Metz does tackle the question of the minimal cinematic unit which he calls 'a shot', 'a photogram', a 'cinematic sign' or 'filmed object', while reserving the term *syntagme* to refer to large sub-codes, such as montage or picture-track in the classical film narrative.⁴ He does contend that any minimum cinematic unit must be particular to a specific cinematic code – Metz's cinematic code being close to his definition of syntagme. To this extent, Metz's theory has notional proximity to the ideas expressed in this essay. He also emphasizes the diversity in size, form and nature among the minimal units⁵ – our syntagms. What he fails to explain is how the agents and agency of minimal unit creation comes into being in the first place. He also omits to include sound – speech, ambient noise and music – as inseparable parts of the filmic language. He does not interpret either the syntagme (in his interpretation of the term) or the photogram according to the method proposed here, which is to identify a minimum threshold for an imprint on the human mind of any meaningful nature. Not unlike morphemes in morphology and phonemes in phonology.⁶

It is suggested, therefore, that any set of momentary still or continuously succeeding images and/or sounds or the combination thereof that induce a meaningful inner human response, voluntary or involuntary, may be identified and called as a syntagme (basic unit) of the filmic language. This definition seemingly produces a pile with endless numbers of elements in it. It may be also be argued that it is too fuzzy at the edges for its own good. That may be so, but it is contended in this essay that this should not bring the theory down. While it is true that we do not know precisely what may or may not instigate meaningful human interpretation or interpretable human response, voluntary or involuntary⁷ – this may differ among individuals – we may actually work our way through imaginary or theoretical visual and auditory units to test them from this point of view. Proceeding from counter-examples to positive examples.

⁴ Metz, *Language and Cinema*, pp. 187-88, 204-07.

⁵ Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 188.

⁶ This comparison is also hinted at by Metz, albeit critically, on p. 187 of the English edition of his book.

⁷ Metz himself suggests that the basic units he calls cinematic signs or photograms are unequal in size and form. He asserts that minimal does not equal small, that a basic filmic segment may last long as long as it does not need additional visual clues. Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 199.

Unconfigured geometric shapes or shades of grey, for instance, do not have preconceived, hard-wired meanings to which the average independent human mind begins an associative process resulting in ratiocination or emotional reaction. In order to have such a function, the above need to be endowed with such meanings by the filmmaker through preliminary associations in the same film, as in the early Russian montage cinema. This means that a particular pattern that constitutes a syntagm in one case, may not do so in other cases. For opening scenes, if required by the director's concept, one needs basic units that possess the capacity to elicit pre-wired associations, as we find, cumulatively and forcefully, in *Bicycle Thieves* or *Red Soghrum*. But this would also be true for *Pickpocket* in a less potent and dramatic sense. The human face, body parts, recognisable objects, shapes, a voice (not necessarily human or carrying meaningful words), certain noises, music with a calculable effect on mood – almost all music – suit this definition. These components form themselves into units that the filmic language, as deployed by the director, will then use throughout the same work. The sub-syntagmatic filmic 'letters', 'syllables' that constitute the syntagmatic vocabulary of each particular film is built up by a filmmaker for each new work of art. In turn, a filmmaker is highly likely to use similar basic units throughout his or her oeuvre. Reuse them each time, thus creating a signature motif unique to himself/herself.

This means that an independent, universal, set of syntagms does not exist. Just as there is no complete set of idealized human speech sounds. There is, however, a finite set of phonemic speech sounds in the context of a single dialect of a particular language. This finiteness of a set of syntagms would also be true for a single complete film. The question of film series arises in this connection. Just as character coherence and development as well as dramaturgical consistency are legitimate expectations laid for series productions, so is the requirement of syntagmatic consistency. Not always met, of course.

Thus, Metz's *signifiant* and *signifié* (as adapted from Saussure) break down into smaller constituent units (like morphemes of a language), units of minimum complexity that change (or are induced in a void) signified meaning. Calling this unit a syntagm simplifies our vocabulary in the interest of clear analysis but it also requires a peculiar definition (redefinition) of what a syntagm is.

Thus a syntagm is a sign (in a signifier role) that makes a conscious or unconscious human response (reaction) possible through visual construction and/or auditory signals. A syntagm may only come into being retrospectively if and when it comes into systemic contact, and remains in combination with, other, already recognized, syntagms in the same filmic work of art, thereby interpenetrating the work through numerous (or indeed infinite numbers of)

connections along tentacles that transmit the image-cum-sound associations in more and more mature and complex forms as the work progresses to achieve its artistic purpose. While a film is necessarily progressing from minute zero in a linear fashion, the syntagms more often combine to produce the filmic language in something like the unison of an orchestra, so that the totality of the filmic effect may appear in the mind of the viewer at any given time even before the closing sequences of a film. The closing sequences, especially in classical dramaturgy, may cast a redefining shadow or light on the totality of the syntagmatic language of a particular film, though it is argued that that is not a particularly fruitful strategy of language creation and use by a filmmaker.

The three spatial dimensions, the dimension of time, the dimension of cognition and the dimension of mostly subconscious emotional response make up the six-dimensional (or four-dimensional if we treat space as a single factor) paradigm of film-space that defies linearity; and which, in the final analysis, is constructed from the basic unit of the syntagm as defined above. The concept is not unlike that of a hologram which shows a(n illusory) three dimensional image engraved into a two dimensional medium, endowed with the curious quality that if fractured into several pieces, each individual shard of the broken hologram will reproduce the totality of the original three dimensional image. Each constituent unit reflecting the whole, the whole capable of being broken up into a virtually infinite number of sub-parts. But as with our syntagms of a cinematic piece of art, there is a limit of fracture beyond which the sub-particle becomes meaningless, no longer representative of the whole. The splinter of a syntagm (the letters and syllables referred to above), like a shiver of glass from a hologram that is too small to show an image, may not be able to evoke space, time, thought or emotion.

The human mind, even the endocrine system of the human body, respond to this filmic language as a result of innumerable specific reactions to the individual syntagms that construct the film-space and its language. Yet, this is an unconscious and uncontrolled process that is difficult to measure. That is, unlike in reading, for instance, when, by reading a noun we become conscious (or at least subconsciously aware) of the *signifié* of the nominal phrase in question, when exposed to a filmic syntagm we become conscious or subconsciously aware of a notion or triggered emotion engendered by the exposure in less predictable and less standardizable ways, quantities and qualities. While these quantities and intensities (that affect quality) may vary, there is a threshold below which they simply do not occur and above which they do. Proving that a basic cinematic unit, as defined here in terms of minimum meaningfulness, exists.

A filmmaker may or may not use the concept of a basic unit or syntagm purposefully or indeed consciously. Rather, its existence is intrinsic to the medium of film. Just as we use

lexemes with distinct meanings without being aware of semantic theory. While it is important that filmmakers be able to work without consciously thinking of, and contriving to devise outcomes by relying on, the anatomy of the filmic language, just as musicians do not contemplate the physics of undertones and overtones while playing their instruments at a live or recorded performance, it is important that they be aware of the overall effect that their particular style of deploying their own arsenal of filmic syntagms achieves and to keep this effect mechanism coherent, more or less constant throughout one particular work of art. Like a musician who is infused with a distinct, fertile and evenly distributed sense of emotive energy while playing a particular piece.

The main difference between the definition of the minimum cinematic sign offered here and Metz's approach to the same problem is of course terminological to start with, but more importantly, the difference concerns human agency. The analysis of inanimate images already produced through the film making process lies at the heart of Metz's paradigmatic approach to the definition of the smallest cinematic sign, whereas the complex approach recommended above favours the totality of human perceptivity in the face of the totality of film. The idea of a syntagm, however short or long as measured in seconds or minutes, as proposed in this essay, connects the psychological and perhaps even physiological anatomy of the eternal human viewer with the anatomy of the medium of film.

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