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Meta Levels and Fictional Awareness

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While the substance of the cinematic language is different from that of natural languages employed in literature, the pragmatic and referential categories are identical. One faces, for example, the global assignment of veracity to a cinematic text: a scene or event portrayed in a film either did or did not happen in the real world. The filmmaker has at his disposal technical devices which constrain the interpretation to the point that it may be impossible to categorically define the veracity of certain scenes. Nor are there substantial differences between literature and film when it comes to questions of intent, be they those of the filmmaker or the expectations of the audience. In many respects the film provides a more varied set of possibilities, but when this amplified technical repertoire is reduced to logical categories, there are few deviations from the resources of the literary text. This conclusion restates the interconvertibility of human cognition through various semiotic systems, but does not deal with the actual mechanisms of textual formation.

At issue is the extent to which cinema may be represented by models used for natural languages. The cinematic language diverges from human language when one considers the putative defining characteristics of the latter which differentiate it from animal communication and artificial sign systems.¹ A noteworthy difference is the persistence of the sign (the film) as opposed to the rapid fading of the spoken word; the written text shares with the cinema this persistence, but whereas the cinema stands in relation to the still image, in itself a freezing of an otherwise rapidly fading sign, the written word has no such static counterpart. In the cinema it is the sequence of images as set forth by the projector which accounts for the triple conversion (from original scene to still image to film sequence to visual/cognitive interpretation), while in the written text it is the act of reading, a voluntary act, which takes the static written word and joins the words into a coherent sequence which is then cognitively processed.

Competence in cinematic language, the ability to extract from a film what the filmmaker intended to put into it, does not follow naturally as the human cognitive apparatus unfolds, nor does it necessarily become more acute with repeated exposure to films.² Some explicit training is required, if only that found in the cultural milieu that makes the individual aware of accepted filmic conventions. This lack of 'training effect' stems from the fact that the viewer is not able to set up a feedback system with the environment: he cannot 'talk back' to the film in its own language, as he can when utilizing natural language with his fellow human beings. Moreover, while the written text is presented in a format derived ultimately from spoken language, in which the author shows through transparently as the generator of the words, there is no such corresponding insight into the author of the filmic text.

Whether or not cinema possesses a viable double articulation,³ it may surely be considered as divisible along the syntagmatic/paradigmatic axis. Essentially the same many-to-one relationship holding between the paradigm and the syntagm in natural language also obtains when considering the cinema. Every element of a film is potentially equivalent to other non-realized possibilities creating the (Jakobsonian) relation of simultaneity. Whereas it may be difficult to precisely specify the individual elements upon which the equivalence relation is to be practiced, the cinema is a semiotic system and hence susceptible to paradigmatic manipulations.

Many of the principal differences between a filmic text and a natural language written text are of a technological nature, resulting from differences in the media of presentation and on the amount of information presented at a given moment. The difficulty of defining a double articulation, the necessity for a feedback loop and the impossibility of defining a cinematic syntax all revolve around quantitative problems of information transfer. In a natural language text, the information proceeds in linear fashion, phoneme by phoneme, morpheme by morpheme, etc., and the amount of information flowing at any given time is small. Thus a linear written format is appropriate for the transmission of speech since the information transfer can proceed sufficiently rapidly. Since in the case of the human cognitive mechanism it is not possible to substantially increase the bandwidth of the input channel, intrinsic limits are established on the rate of flow of information. When these rates are exceeded, anomalous phenomena occur. In the case of spoken language, words blur together, as do the words of a written message presented too rapidly. Television and cinema capitalize on this very phenomenon of oversaturation of a narrow channel by presenting images faster than the brain can separate them individually. The result is the illusion of motion, created from discrete images. It would be possible to establish a catastrophe-theory model to illustrate the situation whereby individual static elements (the frames of a film or television transmission) give rise, at some threshold point, to a continuous impression of motion. In this case a quantitative difference has qualitative consequences.

That many semiotic differences between cinema and natural language should result from the technological nature of the two phenomena should come as no surprise, and when contemplating the nature of fiction in the two areas of narrative potentiality, the same technological element makes another appearance. The notions of intent and expectation are crucially important to the characterization of a text as fictional. Equally important is the element of self-consciousness, the meta-level of contemplation of an artificially generated text. Let us consider first the case of fictional literature, presented in written form. Whereas ultimately the physical format of the text matters little, the fact remains that the reader is *reading*, that is, exercising voluntary control over a process, a skill which has been deliberately learned and which must be brought to bear in order for the text to have its desired effect. The literary text (or any other written text) is immediately perceived as an *artefact*, phenomenologically distinct from the 'real world', whose meaning is not readily forthcoming but which must be coaxed out through the reading process. If the reader does not possess the requisite skills (for example if the text is written in a language or style he does not understand), then the text

remains as mysterious in its own right as Stonehenge or the statues on Easter Island, pure artefacts.

Since the written text is immediately perceived as an artefact, the reader must be aware of the process of reading, although if he is a skillful reader and if the material commands his attention, he may momentarily lose sight of this fact as he becomes 'absorbed' in his reading. Nonetheless the slightest distraction suffices to return the reader to the realization that he is performing a learned technique on an artificial entity. To the semiotic level of the text is added the meta-level of the reader's contemplation of the text *qua* text, that is, the contemplation of himself reading. This metalevel is intrinsic to every act of reading although in many cases there is no reason to discuss it.

If the work being read is non-fiction, the meta-level of reading serves as a transference of information; the format of the text is only a vehicle and other media could transfer the same information. For example the text could be read out loud. In this case there would still be a meta-level of awareness, of being the recipient of a deliberate transfer of information, but this awareness is more subtle than when reading. Its intensity will depend on such factors as the style of the spoken presentation, that is to say, the extent to which the poetic dimension intervenes to make the listener aware of the form of the message and therefore of the very fact of receiving the message. In most cases if a non-fictional text is read aloud, it will be possible to identify the product as an artefact, although the contrary is not necessarily true, for most specimens of everyday speech are non-fictional but are too trivial to warrant preservation in written form.

In a fictional text, the self-awareness may take a slightly different form if the medium is changed, for example if it is read aloud. All depends upon the language of the text, and the degree to which it is perceived as being 'literary'; to the extent that it is, the identifications will be the same as for a non-fictional text. There are many literary texts however in which such an identification is not readily forthcoming, since the texts have been created with the intent of closely mirroring spoken language. With such texts oral transmission may temporarily blur or obliterate perception of an artefact. This blurring of the boundaries between literary artefact and spontaneous speech has been a key element in many types of orally-transmitted folk literature and in its more modern and more sophisticated offspring.

There is an additional dimension to the reader's self-awareness and self-consciousness. If an individual can read, at least at the level to appreciate a literary text, then he presumably can also write. Perhaps his writing abilities are not the equal of those of the author he is reading, but the reader can establish a relation of mutual ability since, through the universal paradigmatic aspect of natural language, the written text represents something which he himself, or someone like him, could have produced. Little does it matter that the odds against his producing anything even remotely close to the text may be astronomical; the important fact is that the literary text is perceived as a mutation or elaboration of a commonly occurring act among the entire literate populace, the act of writing. The gradation between on the one hand grocery lists and messages written in wet cement and on the other hand literary texts are but differences of degree, and do not concern the basic nature of writing. Furthermore,

even the most prosaic unimaginative individual has probably at some point in his life engaged in a certain amount of verbal (and written) originality. The appreciation of the literary text thus involves a certain rapprochement, as a common process becomes transmuted into a fictional artefact.

The situation is radically different in a cinematic text. From the semiotic point of view the nature of the signs (images) entails a difference in the nature of information transfer, as noted above. Of far greater importance is the relation between the images on the screen and the 'reality' as experienced by the viewer. With the advent of the moving picture and later with the wide screen full color spectacular, it became possible to create an environment with a degree⁴ of realism hitherto impossible in other forms of entertainment. Some have stated that the correspondence between cinematic experience and reality is only approximate, and dissolves upon the slightest contemplation; the live theater, they claim, can be much more realistic. That the live stage is considered more realistic than the cinema may have been universally true at the inception of the latter, but it is probably not so today, except for a small elite of theater buffs, and even in their case one suspects that the preferences stem from aesthetic considerations and not from a heightened sense of reality in the stage performance. Even the most elaborate production is severely constrained by scenery and props and except for a small number of situations,⁵ the scenery can give only the slightest hint as to the background. Even before the advent of the multi- or wide-screen cinema, it was possible for the viewer to 'lose himself' in the contemplation of a film. The Cuban novelist and film critic Guillermo Cabrera Infante has noted that⁶ 'the cinema seen in childhood cannot be separated from reality as lived in childhood, and this myth that results from technology is indistinguishable from dreams'. The⁷ connection between dream images and the cinema has been made by others, and it is clear that dreams also mimic reality, although often modifying it.

The cinema creates a powerful impression of reality on the viewer, and if the film is fictional (and most current films are) then a fictional reality is unfolded before the viewer in a manner impossible in the written text. The personages of a film, if the acting is well done, appear to be performing actions common to the everyday world, many of which may be natural and spontaneous, not artificial and specialized like the act of writing. It is this highly lifelike character of many films that causes naive viewers to confuse fiction with reality and to identify the actions of the actors with their lives as human beings. Even in fantasy and science fiction films this mistaken identification may be stronger than would be suspected: one need only consider the fanatical popularity of the Star Trek series and the seriousness with which otherwise apparently normal individuals immerse themselves in Trekkie lore. No one, even the most sophisticated film critic, loses entirely the amazement and sense of engulfment created by a powerful film. Unlike with the written text, the film viewer does not have to learn a skill, although he does have to accustom himself to the phenomenon itself. The effect is all the more powerful for having bypassed the metalevels of learned skills such as reading and writing, and enters directly into the cognitive processing mechanism.

The other metalevel or aspect of self-consciousness is also con-

siderably different in the film, that is, the viewer's identification with his own abilities. It is here that the immense technological differences between writing and filmmaking are brought to bear. The reader of a fictional text sees in the text a transmutation of an activity which he himself engages in, and therefore he is drawn into the text by this partial identification with the Being-as-Writer. In a film, however, there are two ways in which the presented images can be viewed: the naïve way merely identifies the scenes with reality. The more self-aware viewtakes note of the fact of a film, which the casual viewer is totally unable to comprehend. The percentage of cinema viewers who are fully aware of the process of commercial filmmaking, much less those who have made any films (home-movie fans apart) is miniscule, and therefore it is impossible for the average viewer to identify himself with the Being-as-Filmmaker. This inability to correspond in kind to the text as viewed adds to the impression of 'reality' (however unreal or fantastic may be the portrayal) since the viewer is in the same position as regards the film as he is with regard to reality itself; he watches, but he cannot create. Outside of the two-dimensional aspect of the cinema, the other major phenomenological difference is that whereas the viewer cannot create the reality around him, he can interact with it and thereby modify it, something he cannot do with a film. A viewer may get carried away and 'answer back' to something he has seen, but the film continues unchanged. On the one hand the viewer can relate to the scenes since they correspond to real situation; on the other hand, he is faced with a technological immensity (whether or not he understands its intricacies, and especially if he does not) which renders it impossible for him to regard the technical product as a mere extension of his own life. The appearance of fictional material on the screen provides the absolute distancing while at the same time drawing the viewer into the action, a dialectic which accounts for the tremendous power of the cinema. The world of the cinema is the Absolute Other, not reachable by any path within the power of the viewer, except by relinquishing his hold on the world around him and making the quantum leap into the world of the film. In the literary text the fictional world is separated from the reader by a difference of degree, via the shared act of writing. In the film, the fictional world is separated from the viewer by a difference of essential nature, and it is not possible to make a gradual transition from one frame of reference to the other. The reader can never totally divorce himself from the artefactual nature of the text and he can establish a resonance between the external phenomenological world and the world of the text. The viewer must take the plunge, shedding abruptly the metalevel of awareness and diving headlong into the film. Such a total immersion cannot be prolonged indefinitely, but only for short periods. The film viewing experience thus consists of a psychological (and semiotic) shuffling of levels of awareness, between the world of the text and the world of the theater, screening room, or other site where the film is being projected. The ability to cope with this abrupt shifting of levels and to become accustomed to it is a measure of one's acceptance of and participation in a cinematic experience. The reader of literature can take up his pen (or typewriter) and write; the viewer of a film can only follow the images in his mind which, however fantastic, are not artificial. The absolute distancing of metalevels occasioned by the cinema somewhat paradoxically results in the total elimination of the dialectic between

natural phenomenon and artefact.⁹

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Notes

¹ C. F. Hockett, "The problem of universals in language". In J. Greenberg, ed. Universals of Language. MIT Press, 1966, pp. 1-29.

² But cf. C. Metz, Film Language, tr. M. Taylor. New York: Oxford U. Press, p. 72, who does not postulate a learning process.

³ As discussed by Metz, op. cit., pp. 61-67.

⁴ For example Metz op. cit. chap. 1 and the references therein.

⁵ Cf. J. Leirens, Le Cinéma et le Temps, Paris: ed. Du Cerf, 1954, and Metz op. cit., p. 9.

⁶ G. Cabrera Infante, Arcadia todas las noches. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1978, p. 87.

⁷ Cf. Metz, op. cit., p. 10 and references therein.

⁸ The same idea underlies the remarks of Albert Laffay when he notes that the spectator is aware that the images he is viewing have been preselected by a "grand imager". See Logique du Cinéma, Paris, 1964, pp. 15-30. Metz op. cit. p. 75 defines (natural) languages as systems of signs used for intercommunications, adding that like all other art, cinema is one-way communication. We would disagree with the classification of all arts as 'one-way systems', since the literary text, as has been shown, has a certain bilaterality to it.

⁹ See also C. Metz, Language and Cinema, tr. D. Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), chap. 11. For example, on p. 268 Metz notes that "the cinematic language system has more points in common with writing than with language. It is the cineast, not the overall population, who has made the cinema, as it was writers who have made literature ... language belongs to everyone, cinema and literature are things belonging to 'specialists' ...". We would agree with the first statement but not with the second, since, as has been pointed out, there exists a certain rapprochement between the general public and the work of (written) literature that is not present in the film.