

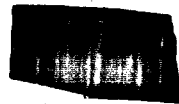


SEMIOTICS OF ART

Prague School Contributions

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Structure, Sign, and Function

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A Note on the Aesthetics of Film

I

It is no longer necessary, as it was only a few years ago, to begin a study of the aesthetics of film with the argument that film is an art. Nevertheless, the question of the relation between aesthetics and film has not yet lost its immediacy, for the development of this young art is still disturbed by changes in its technical ("mechanical") basis. Therefore, more than traditional arts, film needs a norm both in a positive sense (something to observe) and in a negative sense (something to violate). Film artists are at a disadvantage because they face possibilities in their work which are too broad and undiversified. Arts with a long tradition always have at hand a whole series of devices which have gained a definite, stabilized form and conventional meanings through a lengthy development. For example, comparative studies of *plots* show that there are in fact no new themes in literature: the development of almost any theme can be traced back thousands of years. In *The Theory of Prose* Šklovskij cites the example of Maupassant's story "Le Retour" which is based on an adaptation of the very old theme of "a man at the wedding of his own wife" and counts on the reader knowing this theme from elsewhere. The same holds true for poetry, for example with metrical schemes. Every poetry has a certain repertoire of traditional verse schemes which through long years of use have acquired a fixed rhythmical (not only metrical) organization and semantic coloration under the influence of the genres in which they have been used. We can also characterize the poetic genres themselves as mere canonized sets of particular devices. This does not, however, mean that the artist cannot alter traditional norms and conventions; on the contrary, they are frequently violated (the contemporary theory of genres is based on the knowledge that the development of genres results from the constant violation of generic norms), and this violation is experienced as an intentional artistic device.

"K estetice filmu," *Listy pro umění a kritiku* 1 (1933).

What seems to be a limitation is thus, in essence, an enrichment of artistic possibilities, and until recently film had almost no really distinct norms and conventions; even now there are only a few. Film artists are therefore seeking norms. The word "norm," however, brings to mind aesthetics, which used to be, and sometimes even now is, considered a normative discipline. But modern aesthetics, which has given up the metaphysical notion of beauty in any form and which views artistic structure as a developmental fact, should not be expected to prescribe what should be. A norm can only be the product of the development of art itself, a petrified impression of developmental activity. If aesthetics cannot be the logic of art, judging its correctness and incorrectness, it can nevertheless be something else: the epistemology of art. That is to say, every art has certain basic possibilities provided by the character of its material and the way in which the given art masters it. These possibilities imply at the same time a limitation, not a normative one in the sense, for example, of Lessing and Semper who presumed that art does not have the right to overstep its boundaries, but a factual limitation, in that a particular art does not cease to be itself even if it trespasses upon the territory of another art. *Si duo faciunt idem, non est idem*; we therefore understand speeded-up motion in film as a deformation of temporal duration, whereas in theater we would experience the acceleration of the actor's gestures as a deformation of his personality, for dramatic time and film time are epistemologically different.

The transgression of boundaries is a very frequent phenomenon in the history of art. For example, literary Symbolism has often characterized itself as the *music* of the word; Surrealist painting working with poetic tropes (with "transfer" of meaning) claims for itself the name of *poetry*. After all, this is just a return visit of the kind poetry made to painting in the period of so-called *descriptive* poetry (eighteenth century) and during the period of Parnasianism (nineteenth century). The developmental significance of such transgressions of boundaries lies in the fact that art learns to experience its devices in a new way and see its material from an unusual perspective. At the same time, however, the given art remains itself, does not merge with the contiguous art, but attains different effects through the same device or attains the same effect through different devices. If, however, the approximation of another art is to be incorporated into the developmental order

of the art which is striving for this approximation, one condition must be fulfilled: the developmental order and tradition must already exist. The basic precondition for this is certainty in handling the material (which does not mean a blind subordination to the material).

Film has already been in close contact with several arts: drama, narrative literature, painting, and music. However, this was in the days when film had not yet mastered its material, and therefore contact was more a matter of seeking support than a matter of regular development. The effort to master the material is connected with the tendency toward the purely filmic. This is the beginning of regular development. New approximations to other arts will surely come with time, but only as developmental stages. The epistemological inquiry into the conditions provided by the material of film parallels the effort at pure film. This is the task of the aesthetics of film. It should not determine the norm but should reinforce the intentionality of this development by exposing its latent preconditions. Our study is an outline of a particular chapter in the epistemology of film; we shall be concerned with the epistemology of film space.

II

Film space used to be, especially in the beginning, confused with theatrical space. This confusion does not, however, correspond to reality, even if the camera simply photographs the events on a theatrical stage without changing its position as the nature of theatrical space requires.¹ That is to say, theatrical space is three-dimensional, and three-dimensional people move within it. This does not obtain in film, which has the possibility of movement, but movement projected onto a two-dimensional plane and into illusory space. Also, as has already been stated many times, the actor's attitude toward space is quite different in film than in theater. The theatrical actor is a living and integral personality clearly distinguished from the inanimate surroundings (the stage and its contents), whereas the consecutive images of the actor (in some cases only partial ones) on the screen are mere components of the total projected picture, just as in painting, for example.

1. O. Zich, *Estetika dramatického umění* [The aesthetics of dramatic art] (Prague, 1931).

Russian theoreticians of film have therefore coined for the film actor the term "naturščik," that is, model, which does justice to his similarity with the model in painting.²

Now what about the relationship between film space and illusory space? It is clear that pictorial space really does exist in film, and with all the means of painterly illusoriness (if we disregard the more profound basic differences between perspective as a device in painting and perspective in photography). This illusoriness can be intensified greatly by certain means, but these means are also available to painting. One of them is that the usual conception of depth in illusory pictorial space is reversed: the viewer's attention which is usually directed toward the background is instead drawn outward from the picture. This device was often used in Baroque painting. The direction of a gesture (the person standing in the foreground of the picture aims a revolver at the audience) or the direction of movement (a train goes off as if at right angles to the pictorial plane) accomplishes this in film. Another way of intensifying spatial illusion is to look from underneath or above, for example to look from a high story into a deep courtyard. In such cases the illusion is strengthened by the change in the position of the axis of the eye. In reality the position is horizontal (for the perceiver viewing the picture); however, the position presupposed by the picture is almost vertical. Film has both of these means in common with painting.

Another possibility is the following. During filming the camera is mounted on a moving vehicle, and the objective is aimed forward. The movement then takes place in a street or an alley, in other words along a path that is surrounded on both sides by a continuous series of objects. We do not see the vehicle in the picture; we see only the street (the path) leading into the background of the picture but quickly running in the opposite direction, outward from the picture. Because of the motion it might seem that this is a matter of a specifically filmic device, but in fact it is only a modification of the aforementioned case (the reversal of the conception of spatial depth) which in some of its variants is totally accessible to painting.

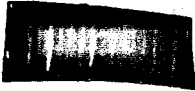
The basis for film space is thus illusory pictorial space. But, in

2. There are, however, nuances in filmic practice; the actor's individuality can be emphasized in film, or, on the other hand, it can be suppressed. Compare the differences between Chaplin's film and Russian films.

addition, the art of film has at its disposal another form of space unavailable to other arts. This is the space provided by the technique of the shot. When there is a change from one shot to another, whether it occurs smoothly or abruptly, the focusing of the objective or the placement of the entire camera in space is, obviously, always changed. And this spatial shift is reflected in the viewer's consciousness through a peculiar feeling which has already been described many times as the illusory displacement of the viewer himself. René Clair explains: "The viewer who looks at a remote automobile race is suddenly thrown under the huge wheels of one of the cars; he observes the speedometer; he takes the steering wheel into his hands. He becomes the actor and sees how the trees falling down around the curves are swallowed up by his vision."³ This presentation of space from "inside" is a specifically filmic device; only the discovery of the shot permitted film to cease being an animated picture.

The technique of the shot, moreover, has had a reverse influence upon the technique of photography itself. On the one hand, it has called attention to the interesting possibilities of the view from underneath and above obtained by circling the object from all sides; on the other hand, and this is more important, the shot has created the technique of the close-up. The pictorial effectiveness of the close-up consists in the unusual bringing close of an object (Epstein says about this: "I was turning my head, and I saw on the right side a gesture reduced to its mere square root, but on the left side this gesture had already been magnified to the eighth power."); the spatial effectiveness of the close-up is achieved by the impression of the incompleteness of the picture which appears to us as a slice of three-dimensional space felt to exist in front of the picture and around its sides. Let us imagine, for example, a hand in a close-up. Where is the person to whom this hand belongs? In the space outside the picture. Or let us assume a picture of a revolver lying on a table. It arouses the expectation that at any time a hand will appear and pick up the revolver, and this hand will emerge from the space lying outside the picture where we place its anticipated existence. Here is yet another example. Two people are fighting and rolling on the floor; a knife is lying near them. The scene is presented in such a way that we alternately see


3. "Le Rythme," *Les Cahiers du mois* (1925).



the fighting pair and the knife in close-ups. Every time that the knife appears, there is suspense. When will the hand that will grab it finally appear? When the hand finally appears in a close-up, there is new suspense. Which one of the pair has taken hold of the knife? Only where we have an intense awareness of the space outside the picture may we speak about a dynamic close-up. Otherwise it would be a matter of a static slice of a normal visual field. We must, of course, remind ourselves that the awareness of its "pictorialness" does not disappear during the close-up; we do not therefore transfer the size of the close-up into extrapictorial space, and the magnified hand is not the hand of a giant for us.

In shots, film space is presented successively through a series of pictures; we feel it in passing from one picture to another. Sound-track film has, however, introduced the additional possibility of the simultaneous presence of film space. Let us imagine a situation quite common in film. We see a picture, and at the same time we hear a sound whose source we must place somewhere outside the picture rather than inside it. For example, we see a person's face and hear speech which is not uttered by the person in the picture; or we see the legs of dancing people and simultaneously hear their words; or we see a street from a moving vehicle which itself remains hidden, and at the same time we hear the hoofbeats of horses drawing a carriage; and so on. Through this arises an awareness of the space "between" the picture and the sound.

Now let us pose the question of the essence of this specifically filmic space and its relation to pictorial space. We have named three means through which filmic space can be achieved: a change in shot, the close-up, and the extrapictorial localization of sound. We shall proceed from the one which is fundamental among them, the one without which film space would not exist at all, the shot. Let us imagine any scene taking place in a particular space (like a room). By no means does this space have to be presented to us in a full shot; it can be presented by means of hints alone, by means of a sequence of partial shots. Even then we shall experience its unity; in other words, we shall perceive the individual pictorial (illusory) spaces shown consecutively on the plane of the screen as pictures of the separate sections of a unified three-dimensional space. How will this total unity of space be presented to us? In order to answer this question we must remind ourselves of the *sentence* as a semantic whole in language. The sentence is com-



posed of words, none of which contains its total meaning. That meaning is fully known to us only when we listen to the entire sentence. Nevertheless, at the very moment that we hear the first word we evaluate it in accordance with the potential meaning of the sentence, a component of which it will be. The sense or meaning of the whole sentence is not therefore contained in any of its words but exists potentially in the speaker's and the listener's consciousness in every word from first to last. At the same time we can observe the successive unfolding of the meaning from the beginning of the sentence to its end. All of this can also be said about film space. It is not fully provided by any of the pictures, but each of the pictures is accompanied by an awareness of the unity of the total space, and the image of this space gains definition with the progression of the sequence of pictures. Thus we may presuppose that specifically filmic space, which is neither a real nor an illusory one, is space-meaning. Illusory spatial segments presented in consecutive pictures are partial signs of this space-meaning, the entirety of which "signifies" the total space.

We can, after all, deduce the semantic nature of film space from a concrete example. In a study on the poetics of film⁴ Tynjanov cites this pair of shots: (1) a meadow where a pig is running around; (2) the same meadow, trampled down, but now without the pig, where a man is walking. Here Tynjanov sees an example of filmic simile: man-pig. But if we imagine these two scenes in one shot (by means of which the interference of specifically filmic space would be eliminated), we discover that the awareness of the semantic link between the two phenomena yields to an awareness of the mere temporal successiveness of the two scenes. Film space thus operates as a semantic factor only through a change in shot. Furthermore, the semantic energy of the close-up, one of the means of creating filmic space, is well known. Epstein says: "Another power of cinematography is its animism. An unanimated object, for example, a revolver, is merely a prop in the theater. In film, however, it has the possibility of being magnified. That Browning which a hand slowly pulls from a half-open drawer . . . suddenly becomes alive. It becomes a symbol of a thousand possibilities." This polysemic quality of the close-up is facilitated

4. "Ob osnovax kino" [On the principles of film], in *Poëtika kino* [The poetics of film], ed. B. Èjxenbaum (Moscow, 1927), p. 67.

by the very fact that the space into which the revolver will be aimed and into which it will disgorge its bullet is at the moment of the projection of this close-up merely an intuitive space-meaning, concealing just these "thousand possibilities."

Because of its semantic character, film space is much closer to space in literature than to theatrical space. In literature, too, space is meaning. What else could it be if it is rendered by the word? Many narrative sentences can be transcribed into filmic space without a change in their structure. Let us take this one as an example: "They embrace slowly, then abruptly break apart, savagely snatch up their knives and throw themselves forward, weapons raised." This is a sentence which, even with its grammatical present tense, could serve as an expression of a tense plot-moment in a novel; in reality, however, it is excerpted from Delluc's screenplay *Fête espagnole* and is broken down into shots as follows:

- shot 175—That's it. They embrace slowly, then abruptly break
apart, savagely snatch up
shot 176—their knives
shot 177—and throw themselves forward, weapons raised⁵

We must also remember that the narrative has at its disposal, and has had for a long time, some means of presenting space similar to those of film, especially the close-up and the panorama (a smooth transition from shot to shot). As proof let me cite a few traditional stylistic clichés: "I lowered my gaze toward . . .," "his eyes were riveted upon . . ."—close-ups; "X. looked around the room: On the right side of the door stood an *étagère*, next to it a closet . . ."—panorama; "here two people were standing in animated conversation, over there a whole group of people who . . . , elsewhere a small crowd was hurrying somewhere . . ."—sudden change in shot.

The resemblance between film and illustration is instructive for the closeness of the filmic and the literary treatment of space. I shall mention only one instance. Certain movements in the art of illustration which specialize in marginalia to the text frequently work with the close-up. There is, for example, Čech's illustrator, Oliva; when Čech's text speaks about Mr. Brouček lighting one match after another, there is a marginal illustration next to the type—a half-open box from which a few matches have fallen out.

5. L. Delluc, *Drames de cinéma* (Paris, 1923), p. 14.

This is a close-up; however, it is not quite the same as in film, because the standard frame is not maintained; that is, the real film close-up takes in the same expanse of screen as, for example, the full shot. Therefore we could speak about the equivalence of illustration and film (except for movement) only if all the illustrations in a given work, close-ups as well as full shots, took up whole pages. However, Oliva consistently avoids any scale in his illustrations, letting the pictures without a frame diffuse themselves in projections over the plane of the pages. Therefore his technique is precisely a reflection of literary space, which is meaning to the extent that it does not have scope; this is because the sign of literary space is the word, whereas the sign of film space is the shot. Film space thus has scope, at least in its signs (proper filmic space-meaning does not, of course, have scope, as we saw when we dealt with the close-up). A higher degree of sheer semantic quality thus distinguishes literary from filmic space, despite their considerable similarities. This has a bearing upon the fact that we can abstract ourselves from space in literature, whereas space is always inevitably present in film. Moreover, literary space has all the summarizing power of the word. Hence the impossibility of a mechanical transposition of a literary description into film. Bofa has vividly illustrated this fact: "The poet wrote that a cab galloped by. The director will show it to us; it is an authentic cab, decked with a coachman in a white hat, whose horse is galloping during a few meters of film. There is no possibility left for you to imagine it; this is the premium for the viewer's laziness."

So far we have spoken as if the total space provided gradually by the context were unique and unchangeable in every film. We must also take into account, however, the fact that space can change in the course of the same film; it can even do so several times. Considering the semantic character of this space, such a change involves a transition from one semantic context to another. A change in scene is something quite different from the transition from shot to shot in the same space. Even if there is a large span between shots, this transition is not an interruption of the continuous succession, whereas a change in scene (a change in the total space) constitutes such an interruption. We must therefore devote our attention to this.

These changes in scene can occur in several ways: by means of a jump, by means of a gradual shift, or by means of bridging. In the

first case (a jump), the last shot of the preceding scene and the first one following it are simply juxtaposed. This is a considerable interruption of the spatial context, the extreme boundary of complete disorientation. It is natural that this kind of transition is charged with meaning (is semanticized); for example, it can mean a condensed summation of the action. In the second case (a shift) a sudden fade-out and fade-in are inserted between the two scenes, or the initial shot of the second scene is dissolved into the last shot of the first scene. Each of these devices has its specific meanings. The fade-out can signify, for example, the temporal distancing of scenes following one another; the dissolve, for example, a dream, a vision, a memory; in both cases, of course, many other meanings are possible. In the third case (bridging), the transition is accomplished through a purely semantic process, for instance a filmic metaphor (a motion occurring in one scene is repeated with a different meaning in the following one: we see boys tossing up their leader whom they like—then a change in scene—and a quite analogous motion which is, however, shoveling up broken soil), or anacoluthon (“a shift in construction”: the policeman’s gesture meaning “the way is clear”—then a change in scene—we see how the iron grating of a shop flies up as if at the sign given by the policeman).

We must add that sound-track film has multiplied the possibilities of transition. On the one hand, it has made possible new variations in transition by bridging (a sound occurring in one scene is repeated in another with a different meaning); on the other, it has provided the possibility of linking by means of speech (in one scene it is hinted that people will go to the theater; then in the following scene, presented without optical transition, we see a theatrical hall). Each of the methods of transition that we have enumerated has its specific character which in individual cases is exploited according to the structure of the given film. In general we can say only that the more that film is reaching its very essence, the more the gradual shift or bridging is becoming its basic mode of transition. The coming of sound-track film in particular has begun a new stage. As long as film worked with captions, the transition between them was always possible with a simple jump, and thus it was not felt as something exceptional, even in places where there were no captions. Since captions have disappeared, the feeling of the continuity of space has become increasingly stronger. And thus even

the transition from scene to scene is not exempt from the general character of filmic space: its successive unfolding is oriented toward continuity.

The successiveness of film space, whether it concerns a change in shot or a change in scene, does not, of course, entail an automatically smooth flow; on the contrary, the tension arising from these changes creates the dynamics of this unfolding of space. It is precisely at these places in a film that the viewer must make a certain effort to understand the spatially semantic relation between contiguous pictures. The degree of this tension varies, but it can be heightened to such an intensity that it alone suffices to carry the dynamics of the whole film, especially if frequent transitions from scene to scene are used, since they are more dynamic and conspicuous than transitions between shots. As an example of a film constructed solely upon this specifically filmic tension, we mention Vertov's *Čelovek s kinoapparatom* [The man with a movie camera] in which the theme is almost entirely suppressed and can be expressed by a single caption: a day in the city streets.

This case is, of course, exceptional. Usually a film has a plot-theme. If we ask about the essence of this theme, we shall discover that a specific meaning is involved here, just as in the case of filmic space. Despite the fact that the "models" of film are concrete people and objectively real things (the actors and the scenery), the plot itself is nevertheless provided by someone (the author of the screenplay) and is constructed during the shooting and montage (by the director) so that the viewers will understand it, will conceive it in a specific way. These circumstances render the plot meaning. The similarity between filmic plot and filmic space-meaning goes even further, however. Filmic plot (as well as narrative plot) is a successively realized meaning: in other words, plot is provided not only by the quality of motifs but also by their succession; if the succession of motifs is changed, the plot changes too. As evidence let me quote from the daily newspaper:

It happened some time ago in Sweden. At that time the censor did not pass . . . the Russian movie *Bronenosec Potemkin* [The battleship Potemkin]. As is well known, the film begins with a scene depicting the maltreatment of sailors, after which the dissidents are to be shot; but a revolt and

uprising take place on the ship. There is also fighting in the city. Odessa in the year 1905! A fleet of battleships appears, but lets the mutineers sail away. This plot was too revolutionary for the censor. The company distributing the film presented it to the censor once more. There were no changes in the pictures and captions. The film was simply "recut" and the scenes scrambled. The result: the film edited in this way begins with the middle part. With the mutiny! (thus after the scene of the interrupted execution). Odessa 1905! The Russian fleet, with which the original version ends, appears, but the first part of the film follows immediately thereafter. Now after the mutiny the sailors stand in a row; they are bound and put in front of the muzzles of guns. The film ends!

If, however, the plot is a meaning and moreover a successively realized meaning, then in a film having a plot sequence there are two successive semantic series which run simultaneously, but do not parallel one another, through the whole film: space and plot. Their interrelation is felt, whether or not the director takes them into account. If this relationship is treated as a definite value, its artistic exploitation is guided in every concrete case by the structure of the given film. In general, we can say only this: the plot is felt to be the basic semantic series, whereas successively realized space appears as a differentiating factor. This is because space is, after all, predetermined by plot. We do not, however, mean to imply that this hierarchy could not be reversed by subordinating plot to space but only that its reversal is felt as an intentional deformation. The absolute realization of such a reversal is quite possible in film because its specific character is not violated by this; rather it is better defined by it. Our proof could be *The Man with a Movie Camera* mentioned above. The opposite extreme is the suppression of successive space in favor of plot; however, to achieve this completely would mean the nullification of specifically filmic space by making the camera immobile during shooting. What would remain would be only pictorial space as a shadow of real space in which the plot took place during shooting. We could therefore find cases of such a radical "defilmization" of film in the initial stage of development of this art.

Between these two extremes there is a wide range of possibilities. The general rules for the actual selection cannot, of course, be

found theoretically because selection is determined not only by the character of the chosen plot but also by the director's intention. To avoid the risk of dogmatism we can say only that the more weakly the plot is connected through motivation (that is, the more it works with mere temporal and causal continuity), the more easily the dynamics of space can assert itself in the plot. Obviously, this does not mean that we could not attempt to link motivation with the strong dynamism of space. After all, the dynamism of space in film is not a simple concept, as we have seen: shots function in the structure of film in one way; changes in scene in another way. We can therefore distinguish between plots which easily yield to a great span between individual shots—those in which motivation is transferred primarily into the interior of the acting characters so that unusual transitions between shots can be conceived as shifts in the field of vision of the characters themselves—and plots easily reconciled with frequent changes in scene—those based on the external acts of the characters. But not even in this instance are we prescribing; we are merely describing the path of least resistance. There is no doubt that the path of greatest resistance can be taken in a concrete case.

Everything which we have said in this study about the epistemological preconditions of film space does not make a claim for absolute validity. As early as tomorrow a revolutionary change in the machine technology of this art may provide it with new, quite unexpected preconditions.