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Experience**

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## **Pragmatics of the Cinematographic Experience**

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### **Abstract**

An inquiry about the relation between mimesis and cinema that points out to the insufficiency of notions such as "imitation" and "narrative" to describe the cinematographic experience. The cinematographic mimesis is thus elaborated through the pragmatics of the cinematographic experience, as a device that modulates the objects of experience and the signs of its representation in a way that makes all means of sensorial and conceptual expression reproducible. The cinematographic experience can be conceived as a general mimetology of any and all experience, although organized according to its four noetic components: its generative component, the transformational one, its diagrammatical components and its mechanical components.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Mimesis, Pragmatics.

## The Cinematographic Experience between Sign and Object

Thinking *mimesis* in cinema demands an effort to disassociate this term from the idea of imitation in its two most common forms: the symbolic one, thinking of the sign as an arbitrary or conventional representation of an object, and the iconic one, that conceives the sign, by analogy, as an object formally similar to another object. In both, the relationship between sign and object is necessarily mediated by one or more representational codes, while to *mimesis* is ascribed the passive role of an imaginary reflex of reality. Although cinema, as an art form, is not really known for excluding these representational codes from its scope – being by definition a hybrid form capable of conflating a great variety of verbal, visual and aural codes (musical or not)- a simple description of the cinematographic *mimesis* as a kind of synthesis or gathering of all of the other arts or as a pure technical means to record and store them, does not allow us to solve the main contradiction between sign and object that runs through its history as well as through the theory of cinema.

As well as the relationship between time and film appears steeped in an insoluble contradiction between the categories of duration and time, also the theoretical reflection on the cinematographic *mimesis* is sandwiched between a phenomenology of perception and a semiotics of film based on the primacy of symbolic convention and culturally coded representation. Thus, when not in service of a roughly simplistic division on what is "natural" (or physiological) and what is "cultural" (or sociological) in a movie experience, the conceptual opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis* acts in film theory in order to cut the field of the cinematographic representation into two different axes: the symbolic, understood as the specific realm of the narrative process in his constant aesthetic development of several audiovisual languages, and the iconic or imaginary, understood as the more specifically technical scope in which the cinematographic *mimesis* must emulate our perception of the world through any given representational code.

Between sign and object, the concept of *mimesis* inherited by the film theory from the aesthetics literature theory was generally reduced to a mere stylistic co-advisory in face of the cinematographic narrative and its many forms of *diegesis*. To the extent that the cinematic experience often searches for a high degree of visual and aural iconicity that sidesteps the most coded aspects of its forms of representation, one can understand how film theory endeavored to demonstrate its object as an artful trick or imitation, emphasizing on the other hand, the development of editing techniques and rules of visual continuity and narrative as the most appropriate framework for thinking about the film in its specificity. Film theory tends thus to subordinate the mimetic element of the film to its diegetic element. This is the true meaning of the theories about the "primacy of *montage*", or about sign and meaning in cinema: the mimetic and naïve illusionism of the amusement park, with its instant fascination with the wonderful that lead us back to cinema as a popular entertainment, has been overcome and overlapped, historically and theoretically, by a process of syntagmatic organization of the cinematographic

text or a discourse in which models of a more traditional cognitive and narrative order were able to claim the full weight of their representational conventions, thus taming the expressive potential of the cinematic experience.

We find a good example of this process of subordination of the cinematic *mimesis* to joint injunctions of phenomenology and semiotics in the work of Christian Metz: at the same time that it relies on a phenomenology of movement, legitimizing the impression of reality in film as a real impression that is produced for the viewer, Metz describes the rules and discursive effects of the hegemonic narrative cinema as if these were models of an universal *a priori* analysis.

According to Metz, the impression of reality in cinema is rather linked to a constant (re)actualization of the sense of movement than to the photographic illusionism of the image. However, no matter how real its presence is, the sense of movement does not directly participate in the cinematographic process of generating meaning as conceived by Metz, for it will be always unfulfilled through its insertion in all possible series of narrative structures. The illusionist perfection of the cinematographic *mimesis* would have been always subordinate to the meaning of codes spinning around a basic grammar of a denotative character (Metz, 1994, 137-138) and a series of aligned rhetorical procedures in the syntagmatic axis.

For a semiotic analysis of film, it is the logical-formal link between the images that matters: the process of meaning is established by articulating at least two successive images, from which a coherent and autonomous narrative flow must develop independently of the character of the images themselves. From this theoretical perspective, the classical narrative cinema is an assumed and conscious paradigm for the analysis of film as language. Everything that does not fit into the fiction film model embodied by the film industry is poorly suited to this analytical model.

If the "very nature" of film lies in its narrative character, the paradigmatic and syntagmatic patterns obtained through the semiotic model are more important to the film theory than the mimetic specificities of the cinematographic representation. These would be responsible for the enormous persuasive imaginary power of movies without ever confusing themselves with the coded instances of meaning that would allow the art of cinema to be considered as a specific language. Which would be those instances, taking into account that the difficulties involved in the conceptual identification of the cinematographic plan with a significant "minimal unit" are considerable?

Metz circumvents this issue by stating that the process of meaning in cinema is determined by a number of open narrative structures, combinable through a fairly flexible set of rules which he calls its "syntagmatic". In cinema, codes possibly formed from such combinatorial would always be "weak": sufficiently flexible and intertwined, thus preventing the formation of cinematographic "tongues" according to the structural model of semiology.

The Film theory developed by Metz is therefore a narratology of film in which one never clearly sees what would be the cinematographic sign considered in itself: "the syntagmatic applies because the image is a statement,

but the image is a statement because it must undergo a syntagmatic" (Deleuze, 1985, 39). The retroactivity of the process becomes evident as the same modes of narrative articulation are postulated as paradigmatic models of analysis, adaptable to the inevitable stylistic changes that crossed the history of cinema in a "large syntagmatic" of narrative cinema in its two versions, classical and modern. Thus, a study of the narrative "phrases" generated by the production of industrial films as well as the so-called "auteur films" that posit their paradigmatic character and shape retroactively, only reinforces and legitimizes such historically hegemonic forms of cinema - even when it does so from an explicitly critical point of view.

As the "filmic fact" has been defined in retroactive terms as the arrangement of images as statements in a discourse, a conceptual approach between the ideas of the visual plan and the cinematographic sign is a permanent temptation to exorcise. That is because to presuppose an imaginary signifier as a means to ensure the possibility of film language implies an imaginary center for the articulation of meaning, a kind of "ultimate authority" supposedly capable of ensuring the legitimacy and legibility of film understood as an audiovisual text to be deciphered by the viewer. Thus, a film narrative semiotics could be situated as a conceptual compromise between the constructivist theories of the cine-language or the all-powerful "montage", typical of the avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, and the phenomenological critique of the cinematographic gaze that had already been announced by Jean Epstein in the 1930s.

A well-adapted theory both to the needs of formulating an ideological critique of the cinematographic discourse and to the theoretical perspective of dominating the film as a total signifier object, Metz' analysis of film narrative structures could only attribute to *mimesis* in film a secondary and entirely subject role regarding the signifier dimension of the narrative. At this point, the semiotics of Metz differed in nothing from other theoretical trends of the time, were they phenomenological, psychoanalytical or historical-materialist.

The concept of *mimesis* needs a more careful approach from the theory and history of cinema, traditionally used to a schematic opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis* that best highlights the importance of the last one in the development of the "language of cinema", while *mimesis* itself remains unthought-of in its specifically cinematographic aspects. Its contribution is reduced to the development of purely technical aspects of film which certainly resulted in the increase of its "impression of reality" and to the so-called "suspension of disbelief" - as in the case of sound, colors and three-dimensional relief - but these were always considered as secondary in relation to the specifically filmic syntax of a motion picture, that is, the cinematographic language as such. In this sense, one cannot speak of a specifically cinematographic *mimesis*, but only of a series of "mimetic" contributions to the art of cinema that added new visual elements to film as well as to sound, without participating more actively in the expressive potentialities of the cinematographic discourse.

Film theory therefore really needs a geological approach capable of digging the foundations of the cinematographic representation in order to discover its sources and primary materials, its characteristic *strata* and lines of composition. In order to obtain it, one must follow the mimetic process in his "descent to the depths" of representation, separating it successively from the ideas of imitation and storytelling to eventually release it from the visual and literary paradigms that tend to condition its understanding.

### **Spectra in the Cave: Model, Copy, Simulacrum**

The classical theory of *mimesis* had already posited the crucial issue of the status of the image inasmuch as the representational link established between images and objects, through its subordination to the Idea, underlies the possibility of an epistemological rescue of the image as a means of iconic recognition, thus allowing the very philosophical definition of the field of representation and assigning to the image its mediating function between model, copy and simulacrum - or its epistemological auxiliary function of metaphor or illustration.

Isn't the Platonic allegory of the cave, the still impassable spectrum of this way of thinking *mimesis* as the epistemological paradigm that coordinates all and any reflection on the question of the image, either towards its condemnation or in order for its exaltation? Aren't we before an elaborate literary composition that aims precisely to avert from the image a particular factor or element that really dwells in it, structuring it as such, while it never subordinates itself entirely to the identity logic of the image as a copy? And wouldn't this element be the simultaneous condition of possibility and impossibility of the image?

To what extent Plato, as the thinker of the allegory, is not already a thinker of the image as a simulacrum beyond any imitative representation process of reality?

### **Simulacrum as the Image's Mise-En-Abîme**

The allegory of the cave is the allegory of an exorcism, the exorcism of the image as a problem for thought. In defining philosophically the field of representation, assigning to him the function of a foundation for any image produced according to the logic of the identity print, Plato seeks to exorcise the ghost of an automatism that seems to him inherent in the perception of the images. But what does Plato fear exactly? In what sense one can speak of automatism in the case of the images reproducing the circuit that his allegory describes?

According to Gilles Deleuze, the abyssal character of the platonic simulacrum demonstrates the disruptive power installed at the heart of the representational logic of similitude. While the image, as a copy, performs an

intermediation of differences between a supposedly respective series of (true) ideas and (existing) objects, thus establishing its last identity, the image-simulacrum comes from a chance encounter between disparate series of signals that sometimes converge and sometimes diverge in a virtually infinite loop of more or less random permutations among its elements. In this circuit, the iconic resemblance is no more than a fleeting trace of the desired identity (or fitness) between objects in the world and the mind ideas. The reproduction of simulacra is therefore a condition of possibility and impossibility of the image in the same way that the representational logic of images engages and seeks to subject it and control it through its possible full absorption into the identity of the same. By stating that "the sign is what flashes between the edge of two levels, between two communicating series" (Deleuze, 1974, 266), Deleuze shows that for Plato the very essence of *mimesis* is to be subordinated to an incessantly differentiating automatism shaper of *simulacra*, an automatism in which alterity can erupt at any moment and completely subvert the pre-established logic of representation, actively inscribing the simulacrum in the interstices of the very symbolic order that was supposed to avert it.

The allegory of the Cave can acquire its full meaning here. The complex projection mechanism imagined by Plato is a holding mechanism of the simulacrum to the copy, of the sensorial perceptive automatism's bondage to the representational logic of *mimesis*. The prisoner who eventually escapes the shackles that chained himself to the Cave cannot do it because of the mechanism, due to the fact that it enables the continuous and repeated projection of the same shadows and specters, while controlling the rampant reproduction of simulacra in the very motion of the iconic self-legitimated images-copy.

It is in this inherent tension about the ontological status of the image that the platonic allegory of the Cave must therefore be located. Its projection mechanism is based on a disjunctive synthesis of a different series of images (images-copy and images-simulacra), which meet also different regimes of organization. While the copy-images are artifacts representing indirectly the "real" objects of the external world, the images-simulacra (shadow copies) are played directly on the wall of the Cave. Thus, *simulacra* are considered by Plato disturbing inasmuch as their perception does not differ at all from the perception of a real object, standing at a perfect indistinct area for the crucial problem of representational logic: the issue of the *adequatio* between the image and the object that it is supposed to represent. The Platonic simulacrum is presented, thus, as the reality of an antagonism between perception as an objective phenomenon (linked to the possibility of the reproduction of images) and the mental image resulting from it (subjectively perceived as the formal meeting of a real object with the idea representing it).

The allegory of the Cave is about this antagonism, ontologically constitutive of the image. To think of the power of the simulacrum is to think of the conditions for a sensorial recurrence of forms through a reproducing perception mechanism to which representation is added, without, however, affecting its autonomy. The identity logic of the image as a copy is loosen in an



overwhelming circuit of recursive perceptions, now returning to the iconic and representational surface of the image, now submerging again in the sensory abyss of their reproductive material processes. The simulacrum is the image elevated to an infinite power of meaning, projecting itself over the bottomless Cave abyss in a ceaseless process of mirrored replications.

If we consider the allegory of the cave as a visual device of *mise-en-abîme* through simulation, there is no more eloquent illustration of the abyssal character of this self-reflective operation on the image than the infinite reduplication effect that a video camera performs when framing its own video monitor while sending it a signal of its own image. This feedback video effect, impossible to be obtained directly from a photochemical image, displays the mirrored character of the image as a simulacrum of itself. An image instantaneously produced in its own generation process, video dispenses with the revelation and copying steps necessary to photography and film, thus playing the simulacrum as a frequency or pulse of a differential variation mechanism where the image inscribes itself directly as a flow. The platonic allegory of the Cave is thus technically accomplished not by the dark projection room *dispositif* - a closed circuit in which the image as a visual coded representation can still control the reproduction of simulacra - but, conversely, by the almost automatic, indiscriminate and uncontrolled reproductive simulations device that is a television network.

The inherent failure of the (almost inevitable) tendency to interpret the allegory of the Cave as foreshadowing the cinematographic spectacle becomes now more comprehensive. Either from an identification of the platonic device with the cinematographic device in a strictly technical level (the level of optical projection of images), either through their identification to a supposedly transcendental epistemological model of perception (therefore necessarily present in any "technical" device), the irresistible temptation of teleology appears as the ultimate spectrum peeping down the Cave depths, to the extent that a strictly technical concept of the cinematographic apparatus is often combined to a linear conception of history that makes Plato a precursor of the brothers Lumière and of the Cave Allegory, the primordial metaphor for the cinematographic *mimesis*.

What is indicated by the simulacrum's *mise en abîme*, however, is that the Allegory of the Cave can only be interpreted as foreshadowing the cinematographic *mimesis* because it is, indeed, a kinematic of the *mimesis*: a control device for the mimetic activity through resistance to the symbolic representation intrinsic to itself. Plato called this resistance simulacrum, since the process of *mise en abîme* shifts the image of its signifying stability (iconic or symbolic), causing a constant oscillation, between sense and non-sense, able to subtract the *mimesis* out of the closed circle of representation, launching it in a ceaseless movement that now moves away from the circle and sometimes approaches it.

Therefore, simulacrum and image can only be thought of in the simultaneity of their mutual exclusion, that is, as a disjunctive synthesis in which the infinitely differentiating power of the simulacrum emerges from the

gap between the material conditions of production and perception of the image and the representational logic presiding its understanding in symbolic terms. Thus, *mimesis* cannot be described only as a closed and perfect reproductive cycle of copies made out of templates or of meanings linked on to its signifiers - nor historicized in purely hermeneutic or iconological terms. To think about the mimetic activity in cinematic terms, one needs to postulate a structural opening of the simulacrum for the accident and the irreversibility of time while keeping its essential and permanent bond, even ambiguous and contradictory, to the historically traditional models of representation.

Would there be *mimesis* without representation? Answering yes to this question requires the double affirmation of a simulacrum without simulation and of kinematics of the mimetic device that does not comply with any model, hermeneutic or iconological. Being *mimesis* requires a certain type of *noetics* beyond any semiotics, as Paul Ricoeur has said, such *noetics* must be conceived, above all, as a *praxis*, that is, as an activity of material reconfiguration of the world that is inherent to the world and not only its reflexive representation. *Mimesis* is an activity of thinking, but this thinking is stuffed in the body that reconfigures, in its doing, both the objects of the world and the signs of his imaginary play.

We call this elusive movement, inapprehensible to a purely imitative or narrative conception of the mimetic activity, the *kinematics* of *mimesis*: from *mimesis* as a reproduction of copies (imitation) or a metaphorical representation (narration), to *mimesis* as a metamorphic form of production doubly articulated to its material expression and its mental contents, the mimetic process subtracts itself to the powers of the metaphor through metamorphic reconfiguration, standing over a double articulation of a material plan of intensity variations to a mental plan of sense affections. These plans are reconfigured endlessly in a disjunctive motion (or *kinematics*) in which the correspondence between them is never complete, for it settles itself on the signifying image sometimes, but others it fades into the *simulacrum* generated by the very mimetic device. The *kinematics* of *mimesis* is thus the tracking of the reconfiguration lines that connect and disconnect a material plan of expression, and its' incessantly varying intensities, to a mental plan of contents, with its power for the affection of the senses, in more or less stable forms that are established only in the temporal dimension of a becoming.

### **Pragmatics of the Cinematographic Experience**

In Charles S. Peirce' semiotics, traditional static notions of significant, meaning and reference are replaced by a recursive semiotics that is postulated in purely logical and formal terms. Although cyclical and recursive, the semiotic process is not necessarily closed or circular. If the general form of the representation is always triadic, this, however, is never taken for granted, as its horizon of references constantly changes from an infinite multiplicity of potentially significant *representamina*. It is precisely this probabilistic

character of Peirce's semiotics that enables its consistent application to the problem of the relations between the images and signs, since it involves the representation without guaranteeing it, because its recursivity presents the permanent possibility of a third degenerating into a second and a second into a first, that is, of the generation of *hypo-signs* that are not really *replicas* because they do not represent an object to an interpretant, being considered only in themselves.

In its articulation of a material ontology of image and time (Bergson) and a semiotics able to cope with a non-representational expression (Peirce), Deleuze thinks the pragmatics of the cinematographic experience as a simultaneous and reciprocal modulation of the objects of experience to the signs of a representation, in a device capable of transducing a plan over the other in a pre-significant level that is not exclusively visual or photographic: all means of expression (verbal, visual, aural) are scalable by this device.

In its articulation of a material ontology of image and time with a semiotics able to cope with non-representational expressions, Deleuze thinks of the cinematographic apparatus as an analogical device of simultaneous and reciprocal modulation of matter and form, content and expression. His concept of the image is not necessarily subject to the iconic and symbolic encodings that determine it as a *legi-sign* that dictates the meaning of a vision or a metaphor and is no longer exclusively visual (without becoming completely abstract or metaphorical), because it is based on the figural properties of Peirce's analog diagram: in themselves, they apply to any material medium but do not necessarily lead to the stabilization of the process of signification.

So far as Peirce's concept of the analog diagram can be applied to the deleuzian concept of image, its first property rests on the analog iconicity of the image, corresponding to the affection-image in its sensitive apprehension of an object, its second one corresponds to the indexical character of the image as action-image, with its action and reaction play, whereas the third one is related to the relation-image concept whenever the image becomes a symbol that represents one sign to another sign. But as Deleuze also foresees the intermediate stages of transition between these three types of movement-image (drive-images and reflection-images), and deduces three different types of sign by type of image (one generative sign and two antithetical signs of composition), he ends up unfolding and deepening Peirce's semiotics scheme, by the deduction of new "cases" or types of significant relationships, and by changing the meaning and function of others.

One can summarize the overall result of the double articulation between the semiotics of Peirce and Bergson's image ontology as follows: the zero degree is a matter in its very motion. Only when it is recursively modulated in a double articulation of content and expression, it can be described as a perception-image **{dicisigns, rheums, frames}**, that is, as the perception of a perception able to generate different series of signs according to the nature of the relations established with other images. These relationships are generated (or drawn) according to the categorical thricotomy of experience: the *firstness* of the affection-image **{quality icons, power icons, qualisigns}** matches the

iconic-analog representation of the objects in the world, while the drive-image **{idols, fetishes, symptoms}** gradually mediates the continuous passage for the action-image's *secondness* **{sinsigns, contents, traces}** as an analog-metaphorical representation of a *mythos* or intrigue. Finally, the reflection-image **{figures of attraction, inversion figures, speeches}** moves on to the *thirdness* of the relation-image and its representational conventions marked by openly symbolic or allegorical figures **{marks, highlights, symbols}**.

Thus one can easily extract eighteen elements and a wide combinatorial of images and signs that does not exhaust at all the scope of the Bergson/Peirce articulation proposed by Deleuze in the sense that this is not an exclusively visual closed taxonomy of signs, but a semiotic logic applied to the bergsonian concept of image, that is, the image as matter in motion or the movement-image. This logic does not constitute itself as a closed semiotic because it is generative and postulates a constant modulation of the sign by the image and of the image by the sign, and of a material plan of expression (the image as the material support below the visual representation) by a mental plan of contents (the sign as a cognitive network of mental relations).

Therefore, one cannot understand the *generative component* of the semiotics logic as the practical application of a kind of "universal language of thought", which would make the pragmatic a mere empirical field of observation of the epistemological validity of the relationships established by a sign. It must be thought of deliberately as an incomplete semiotic logic insofar as it remains constitutively open to the constant modulation of thought by the world and vice-versa. The poetic potential of film is the properly semiotic potential of a "cursed" mimetic device, able to directly modulate the world of material expressions to re-configure its forms and contents without the necessary explicit intention to produce meaning from similarities or pre-coded metaphors. Instead of referring to the history of cinema only from its internal logical structure, the pragmatic *transformational component* must therefore think the film in its relations with history, that is, not only as *mimesis*, but above all as *praxis*.

Deleuze uses the concept of the *analog diagram* to think how images and signs constantly change themselves in a double articulation - modular and disjunctive – between content and expression. Considered in its specific uniqueness, the diagram is called by Peirce the *iconic sinsign*, an analog produced by similarity, not by metaphor. Its ability to modulate a plan on other in a non-significant level determines the non-linguistic character of the cinematographic apparatus, because the generative component of any film is not subject to one or more representational codes, much less to a supposed universal code waiting for decryption - but to another component of a more general and abstract order, which governs the generation of meaning in any film, its *diagrammatic component*: any device that can be thought of as simultaneously articulated to a mechanical (matters of expression) as well as to an animical (contents of the sign) plan, can be considered as a machinical device that constantly reconfigures its signs and objects in a double disjunctive joint. All forms of media contents (verbal, visual, aural) can be subjected to

such a machine, since they must be necessarily supported by the material forms of expression related to a particular device. This is why mimetic metamorphosis is not just an imaginary process fully regulated by coded meaning and representation, for it is at the same time a process that happens on the level of the device itself, be it a body (organic or not), a tool (artificial or not) or a machine (mechanical or otherwise).

Therefore, there is one last critical component in the pragmatics of the cinematographic experience: the *mechanical component*, which unfolds the historically concrete assemblages that update the cinematic apparatus as an abstract machine, that is, as a pragmatic device open to technical and aesthetic changes that could alter its diagram. Without a proper understanding of the mechanical and diagrammatic components of the cinematic apparatus, that is, an understanding cinema as an abstract machine, one cannot fully understand its generative and transformational components - the history of cinema as a mimetic experience and the historical experience of cinema as the *mimesis* of every imaginable experience.

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