

Cohesion in Filmic Text

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A Thesis Proposal

1. Introduction

Within film there is a complex interaction of co-occurring modalities, e.g. words, images, sounds, colors, actions, etc, that combine to create meanings. In this thesis, I investigate just how this meaning creation takes place.

Methodologically, I explore to what extent some basic analytic categories from functional linguistics can be extended to apply within and across filmic modes. In particular, I will investigate the contribution made by filmic **cohesion** to the total construction of meaning.

Briefly speaking, this thesis aims at creating an approach to film analysis, which is essential and has not been fully developed yet—

Traditionally, language has been regarded as the major communicating mode, as visual and other modes have been considered to play only minor accompanying roles in terms of communicating and meaning making. However, meaning creation of multi-modal text, e.g. film, cannot be examined without a thorough investigation of different modalities at the same time (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). Recently, the social-functional semiotic model developed by M.A.K. Halliday (1976, 1978, 1985) has provided a framework for approaches to analyzing different modalities. However, there has not been any approach to simultaneously investigating film as a whole, as a semantic edifice co-structured by different modalities.

In this thesis, based on the functional framework and the analytical methods for different modalities theorized so far, I will develop an approach to analyzing different modalities in film. It is proposed that cohesion is an effective theory to synchronously explicate semiotic units that are essential in constructing meaning.

Linguistic cohesion comprises the systems of conjunction, reference, lexical cohesion, substitution and ellipsis. In chapters of his book *Introducing Social Semiotics* (2005), Theo van Leeuwen has developed descriptive tool for describing the conjunction of multimodal texts, with particular emphasis on the

logical linking words, image and sound and their typical application in text genres. I will take van Leeuwen's tool for conjunction as a starting point and look further into other systems of cohesion as well as their application in different film genres.

To sum up, the goal of the study is to theorize the cohesive relations of verbal, visual and acoustical modes employed in filmic text. Through problematising the co-occurrence of visual, verbal and acoustical modes, a tool for describing cohesive relations of semiotic units in filmic texts will be developed. In addition, how cohesive relations vary in different filmic genres will be also a main emphasis of this research.

In this proposal, I will first present the state of the art, followed by my research questions formulated in more detail. Subsequently, the methodology and my previous research work will be explicated. Finally, a research plan will be scheduled at the end of the proposal.

2. The State of the Art

2.1. Linguistically-oriented analysis of film

Since the beginning of cinematography, film-theoreticians have tried to compare "film" with verbal language in an attempt to justify the film medium. Pudovkin recognized that the union of the film sequences has a strong influence on the cinematographic statement of the director. He was the first person to consider comparing film and language to each other and the first to equate film images with words (Nöth 1995). Eisenstein also concerned himself with this comparison. He went further, from comparing words and images, to comparing images with hieroglyphics and ideograms and used the images as a sort of optical words. He viewed sequenced images as the vocabulary of the "written" language of film. Eisenstein believed it was the responsibility of film theoreticians to establish the semantic form and the meanings of idiomatic images (Taylor, 1998). The counter-movement to "montage", which was coined by Eisenstein, the so-called "Mise-en-Scene", comes from France with its pioneer André Bazin. For Bazin, film language is essential within the film's arrangement and form. He believed that the creation and assembly of individual images to be more important than montage, i.e. putting these pictures together. He put emphasis on syllables of design, lighting and newly

developed film techniques, all of which provide viewers with a form of independence and freedom (Andrew, 1976).

In the 1960s and 1970s, several pioneer film semioticians derived film theories from the thoughts of semiotics and structural linguistics. The most thorough and influential approach to film language this time was developed by Christian Metz. Metz argued that there is no unit in film that equals the “word” in language. He believed that the image is the smallest unit in cinema and is already at the same level of a sentence or a paragraph. This fact led him on to further comparison of shots and words, which illustrates his strong relations to linguistic semiotics. For example, he stated that only to a small extent does a shot assume its meaning in paradigmatic contrast to the other shots that might have occurred at the same point along the filmic chain (since the other possible shots are infinite in number), whereas a word is always a part of at least one more or less organized semantic field (Stam, 2000). He stated that when composing a film image there is no substantive paradigmatic series that the sequence must be chosen from within. Once a shot is composed, its location within a syntagmatic series, i.e. a sequence, is much more open than that offered by a linguistic grammar. Because of this filmic freedom, Metz defined basic narrative units in the cinema as “autonomous segments” (Metz, 1974) and argued that the major mode of analysis for cinema lies in syntagmatic relations. Based on this, Metz developed a series of possible syntagmatic relations which can be considered to be the major combinations possible.

To conclude, Metz ultimately rejected a theoretical model for film based on verbal language, although he still believes that cine-semiotics can learn much from linguistics. His primary reason for rejecting complete analogies to language lies in the observation that the image, unlike the word, is not a discrete unit that can be reduced into smaller basic units and analyzed. He stated “The image discourse is an open system, and it is not easily codified, with its non-discrete basic units (the images), its intelligibility (which is too natural), its lack of distance between the significate and the signifier” (ibid).

However, “multimodal discourse analysis”, and the recent development of functional semiotics provide tools for discourse analysis across visual and other modalities, which Metz regarded as nearly impossible. This framework will be elucidated in more detail in the next section.

2.2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal discourses are those in which two or more semiotic modes interact to construe meaning (Baldry, 2000; Kress et. al.; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Lemke 2003; O'Halloran, 2004). The development linking general linguistic concepts to other communicative modes beside language started in 1930' and 1940' Prague School and the 1960' Paris School (Nöth, 1995). More recently, it has been widely expanded under the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistic Theory, developed by M.A.K. Halliday. From the social semiotic point of view, a semiotic system is structured around three kinds of meaning, also referred to as three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual.

The ideational meaning constructs and analyzes our experience of the world and the logical relations. The interpersonal categorizes the various acts by which the participants relate to each other and the various appraisals which participants make relating to an act or a whole text. The textual meaning is about what resources semiotic modes have for producing a cohesive semantic edifice instead of a random collection of acts. The three metafunctions are modeled as sets of features, or systems, which are options connected into networks. The feature selections from the systems are realized by structures.

Recently, some social semioticians have moved systemic functional theory beyond language and, by utilizing its pan-semiotic principles, to other semiotic modes. So far, four modes have been theorized as follows:

1. Architecture/three-dimensional space (O'Tool 1994, 2004, Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, Stenglin, 2004)
2. Action (Martinec, 1998, 2000)
3. Speech, music and sound (van Leeuwen 1999)
4. Visual Images (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, O'Toole 1994)

Furthermore, when two or more of the above semiotic modes co-articulate, they have the potential to multiply meaning and generate a semiotic synergy that is even greater than the sum of its parts (Lemke 1998, Royce, 1999).

Another issue that has received a great deal of attention is genre analysis in multimodal texts. For example, the research project "GeM" led by Bateman, et.al. (1999, 2000, 2001, 2004) explored a framework for describing the resources, e.g. graphics, text, layout, that different document genres use to

communicate and developed an annotation scheme for preparing multimodal corpora. The thesis proposed here intends to continue both lines of multimodal synergy and genre research—Firstly, through problematising the co-occurrence of visual, verbal and acoustical modes, a tool for describing cohesive relations of semiotic units in filmic texts will be developed, and finally, how cohesive relations vary in different filmic genres will also be a main emphasis of this research.

3. Goals of the Research

The main purpose of the research is to develop a tool for synchronically describing and analyzing different semiotic modes and their cohesive relations in texts that unfold in time.

In addition, this study will also respond to the following research questions:

1. To what extent is cohesion theory in language applicable in filmic text?
Would there be more or fewer categories found in filmic text than in verbal text?
2. What are the functional units that are being related in cohesive chains and what are the units that determine the textual meaning in a sequence of filmic text?
3. Can color, music and typography also provide continuity, and how are they related to linguistic continuity?
4. How does cohesion operate differently in different genres?

4. Methodology

This study is essentially qualitative research which comprises two foci:

1. Investigating cohesion in filmic texts.
2. Exploring different adaptability of cohesive relations in different film genres.

The two aspects of the research will not be explicated separately. Rather, the tool for describing cohesive relations needs to be forged with the consideration of different application in different genres.

The analysis will be based on a corpus of collected films that include various types of filmic text, for example, narrative films, documentaries, musicals, cartoons, different types of TV commercials, etc. The analytical tools for different semiotic modalities are drawn from the theories derived from the

systemic functional framework, such as, analytical tools for language, images, sounds, actions, etc.

One sub-project that needs to be completed in the early stage of the study is evaluation of a major analytical tool—visual grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). The importance of the evaluation lies in the fact that in this research, cohesion and textual meaning applied to visual modalities are investigated according to the categories of visual grammar structured by Kress and van Leeuwen. Therefore, experiments need to be carried out to evaluate to what degree the tools and categories are trustworthy for visual analysis.

Finally, with the consent of my supervisor, Prof. Bateman, I will compose the PhD dissertation in English.

5. Previous Work

This proposed PhD work is a further investigation of the interface of word, image and sound in filmic text and builds on MA research work done at Cardiff University. My MA thesis, titled *Words and Images—A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Contemporary News Magazine Covers*, uncovers the design strategies used in media texts, specifically, contemporary news magazine covers. This research examines how signs are made and modes are selected for representation and interpretation. Firstly, the background of the study was described—a brief history of printed media images, multimodal approaches, grammar for visual analysis and the systemic approach of genre analysis. Secondly, the most commonly seen five elements—portrait photos, documentary photos, manipulated images, words, and colors, were examined respectively in terms of their functions, potential and embedded meanings. Finally, four genres (narrative, identification, revelation of multiplicity, symbolization) were found in a genre analysis which elucidated the functional and communicative goal of each genre. The stages of each schematic structure and the realization of their constituent elements were depicted in detail and the conclusion explained how each genre is particularly well-suited for certain types of news stories.

In July 2005, I also presented a paper at the 32nd Systemic Functional Linguistics Congress, titled “Multimodal Analysis of AIDS TV commercials”, which explores the co-occurrence of verbal, visual and acoustical modes in TV

commercials.

To conclude, the proposed research is an expansion of my previous work and further investigation of the co-occurring three modalities: words, images and sounds in film.

6. Time Frame of the Research

I started the research work in October 2004, and so far, a great deal of literature review and data collection has been done. The research plan from October 2005 to 2007 is as follows:

2005

October-December	Evaluating Visual Grammar developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen. (Collaborative work with Dr. Peter Holz at Bremen University). Developing the tool for describing reference, substitution, etc in filmic text and its relationship with different filmic genres.
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2006

January-June	Investigating: 1. Lexical cohesion, macro theme and textual meaning in filmic text. 2. The degree of applicability of cohesion theory in filmic text.
July-December	Building up a complete framework for systems of cohesion in filmic text.

2007

January-August	Completing the dissertation.
September	Submitting the dissertation
October	Dissertation defense

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