The purpose of this text is to examine some of the problems and difficulties confronting the person who wants to begin undertaking, in the field of “cinematographic language,” de Sausser’s project of a general semiotics: to study the ordering and functionings of the main signifying units used in the filmic message. Semiotics, as de Sausser conceived it, is still in its childhood, but any work bearing on one of the nonverbal “languages,” provided that it assumes a resolutely semiological relevance and does not remain satisfied with vague considerations of “substance,” brings its contribution, whether modest or important, to that great enterprise, the general study of significations.

The very term “cinematographic language” already poses the whole problem of the semiotics of film. It would require a long justification, and strictly speaking it should be used only after the in depth study of the semiological mechanisms at work in the filmic message had been fairly well advanced. Convenience, however, makes us retain, right from the start, that frozen syntagma—“language”—which has gradually assumed a place in the special vocabulary of film theoreticians and aestheticians. Even from a strictly semiological point of view, one can perhaps at this time give a preliminary justification for the expression “cinematographic language” (not to be confused with “cinematographic langue” (language system), which does not seem to me acceptable)—a justification that, in the present state of semiological investigations, can only be very general. I hope to outline it in this essay . . .

CINEMA AND NARRATIVITY

A first choice confronts the “film semologist”: Is the corpus to be made up of feature films (narrative films) or, on the contrary, of short films, documentaries, technological, pedagogical, or advertising films, etc.? It could be answered that it depends simply on what one wants to study—that the cinema possesses various “dialects,” and that each one of these “dialects” can become the subject of a specific analysis. This is undoubtedly true. Nevertheless, there is a hierarchy of concerns (or, better yet, a methodological urgency) that favors—in the beginning at least—the study of the narrative film. We know that, in the few years immediately before and after the Lumière brothers’ invention in 1895, critics, journalists, and the pioneer cinematographers disagreed considerably among themselves as to the social function that they attributed to, or predicted for, the new machine: whether it was a means of preservation or of making archives, whether it was an auxiliary technogaphy for research and teaching in sciences like botany or surgery, whether it was a new form of journalism, or an instrument of sentimental devotion, either private or public, which could perpetuate the living image of the dear departed one, and so on. That, over all these possibilities, the cinema could evolve into a machine for telling stories had never been really considered. From the very beginnings of the cinematograph there were various indications and statements that suggested such an evolution, but they had no common measure with the magnitude that the narrative phenomenon was to assume. The merging of the cinema and of narrativity was a great fact, which was by no means predestined—nor was it strictly fortuitous. It was a historical and social fact, a fact of civilization (to use a formula dear to the sociologist Marcel Mauss), a fact that in turn conditioned the later evolution of the film as a semiological reality, somewhat in the same way—indirect and general, though effective—that “external” linguistic events (conquests, colonizations, transformations of language) influence the “internal” functioning of idioms. In the realm of the cinema, all nonnarrative genres—the documentary, the technical film, etc.—have become marginal provinces, border regions so to speak, while the feature-length film of novelistic fiction, which is simply called a “film”—the usage is significant—has traced more and more clearly the king’s highway of filmic expression.

This purely numerical and social superiority is not the only fact concerned. Added to it is a more “internal” consideration: Nonnarrative films for the most part are distinguished from “real” films by their social purpose and by their content much more than by their “language processes.” The basic figures of the semiotics of the cinema—montage, camera movements, scale of the shots, relationships between the image and speech, sequences, and other large syntagmatic units—are on the whole the same in “small” films and in “big” films. It is by no means certain that an independent semiotics of the various nonnarrative genres is possible other than in the form of a series of discontinuous remarks on the points of difference between these films and “ordinary” films. To examine fiction films is to proceed more directly and more rapidly to the heart of the problem.

There is, moreover, an encouraging diachronic consideration. We know, since the observations of Béla Balázs, André Malraux, Edgar Morin, Jean Mitry, and many others, that the cinema was not a specific “language” from its inception. Before becoming the means of expression familiar to us, it was a simple means of mechanical recording, preserving, and reproducing moving visual spectacles—whether of life, of the theater, or even of small **mises-en-scène**, which were specially prepared and which, in the final analysis, remained theatrical—in short, a “means of reproduction,” to use André Malraux’s term. Now, it was precisely to the extent that the
cinema confronted the problems of narration that, in the course of successive groupings, it came to produce a body of specific signifying procedures. Historians of the cinema generally agree in dating the beginning of the "cinema" as we know it in the period 1910-15. Films like Enoch Arden, Life for the Czar, Quo Vadis?, Fantomas, Cabiria, The Golem, The Battle of Gettysburg, and above all Birth of a Nation were among the first films, in the acceptance we now give this word when we use it without a determinant: Narration of a certain magnitude based on procedures that are supposed to be specifically cinematographic. It so happens that these procedures were perfected in the wake of the narrative endeavor. The pioneers of "cinematographic language"—Méliès, Porter, Griffith—couldn’t care less about "formal" research conducted for its own sake; what is more (except for occasional naive and confused attempts), they cared little about the symbolic, philosophical or human "message" of their films. Men of denotation rather than of connotation, they wanted above all to tell a story; they were not content unless they could subject the continuous, analogical material of photographic duplication to the articulations—however rudimentary—of a narrative discourse. Georges Sadoul has indeed shown how Méliès, in his story-teller's naïveté, was led to invent double exposure, the device of multiple exposures with a mask and a dark backdrop, the dissolve and the fade-in, and the pan shot. Jean Mitry, who has written a very precise synthesis of these problems, examines the first occurrences of a certain number of procedures of filmic language—the close-up, the pan shot, the tracking shot, parallel montage, and interlaced, or alternative, montage—among the film primitives. I will summarize the conclusions he reaches: The principal "inventions" are credited to the Frenchmen Méliès and Promio, to the Englishmen G. A. Smith and J. Williamson, and to the American E. S. Porter; it was Griffith's role to define and to stabilize—we would say, to codify—the function of these different procedures in relation to the filmic narrative, and thereby unify them up to a certain point in a coherent "syntax" (note that it would be better to use the term syntagmatic category; Jean Mitry himself avoids the word syntax). Between 1911 and 1915, Griffith made a whole series of films having, more or less consciously, the value of experimental probing, and Birth of a Nation, released in 1915, appears as the crowning work, the sum and the public demonstration of investigations that, however naive they may have been, were nonetheless systematic and fundamental. Thus, it was in a single motion that the cinema became narrative and took over some of the attributes of a language.

Today, still, the so-called filmic procedures are in fact filmic-narrative. This, to my mind, justifies the priority of the narrative film in the filmosemiological enterprise—a priority that must not of course become an exclusivity.

STUDIES OF DENOTATION AND STUDIES OF CONNOTATION IN THE SEMIOTICS OF THE CINEMA

The facts I have just reviewed lead to another consequence. The semiotics of the cinema can be conceived of either as a semiotics of connotation or as a semiotics of denotation. Both directions are interesting, and it is obvious that on the day when the semiological study of film makes some progress and begins to form a body of knowledge, it will have considered connotative and denotative significations together. The study of connotation brings us closer to the notion of the cinema as an art (the "seventh art"). As I have indicated elsewhere in more detail, the art of film is located on the same semiological "plane" as literary art: The properly aesthetic orderings and constraints—versification, composition, and tropes in the first case; framing, camera movements, and light "effects" in the second—serve as the connoted instance, which is superimposed over the denoted meaning. In literature, the latter appears as the purely linguistic singification, which is linked, in the employed idiom, to the units used by the author. In the cinema, it is represented by the literal (that is, perceptual) meaning of the spectacle reproduced in the image, or of the sounds duplicated by the soundtrack. As for connotation, which plays a major role in all aesthetic languages,* its significate is the literary or cinematographic "style," "genre" (the epic, the western, etc.), "symbol" (philosophical, humanitarian, ideological, and so on), or "poetic atmosphere"—and its signifier is the whole denoted semiological material, whether signified or signifying. In American gangster movies, where, for example, the slick pavement of the waterfront distills an impression of anxiety and hardness (significance of the connotation), the scene represented (dilapidated buildings, crates heaped on top of each other, etc.) conveys the feeling of a certain picture of the world (signifier of denotation), and the technique of the shooting, which is based on the effects of lighting in order to produce a certain reading of the scene (signifier of connotation), converges to form the signifier of connotation. The same scene filmed in a different light would produce a different impression; and so would the same technique used on a different subject (for example, a child’s smiling face). Film aestheticians have often remarked that filmic effects must not be "gratuitous," but must remain "subordinate to the plot." This is another way of saying that the significance of connotation can establish itself only when the corresponding signifier brings into play both the signifier and the significance of denotation.

The study of the cinema as an art—the study of cinematographic expressiveness—can therefore be conducted according to methods derived from linguistics. For instance, there is no doubt that films are amenable to analyses comparable (mutatis mutandis) to those Thomas A. Sebeok has applied to Cheremis songs, or to those Samuel R. Levin has proposed. But there is another task that requires the careful attention of the film semiotist. For also, and even first of all, through its procedures of denotation, the cinema is a specific language. The concept of diegesis is as important for the film semiotist as the idea of art. The word is derived from the Greek διήγησις, "narration" and was used particularly to designate one of the obligatory parts of judicial discourse, the recital of facts. The term was introduced into the framework of the cinema by Étienne Souriau. It designates the film’s represented instance (which Michel Dufrenne contrasts to the expressed, properly aesthetic, instance)—that is to say, the sum of a film’s denotation: the narration itself, but also the fictional space and time dimensions implied in and by the narrative, and consequently the characters, the landscapes, the events, and other narrative el-

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*Aesthetic language practices a kind of promotion of connotation, but connotation occurs as well in various phenomena of expressiveness proper to ordinary language, like those studied by Charles Bally (Le Langage et la vie, Geneva, Payot, 1926).
ments, in so far as they are considered in their denoted aspect. How does the cinema indicate successivity, precession, temporal breaks, causality, adversee relationships, consequence, spatial proximity, or distance, etc.? These are central questions to the semiotics of the cinema.

One must not indeed forget that, from the semiological point of view, the cinema is very different from still photography whence its technique is derived. In photography, as Roland Barthes has clearly shown, the denoted meaning is secured entirely through the automatic process of photochemical reproduction; denotation is a visual transfer,1 which is not codified and has no inherent organization. Human intervention, which carries some elements of a proper semiotics, affects only the level of connotation (lighting, camera angle, “photographic effects,” and so on). And, in point of fact, there is no specifically photographic procedure for designating the significant “house” in its denoted aspect, unless it is by showing a house. In the cinema, on the other hand, a whole semiotics of denotation is possible and necessary, for a film is composed of many photographs (the concept of montage, with its myriad consequences)—photographs that give us mostly only partial views of the diegetic referent. In film a “house” would be shot of a staircase, a shot of one of the walls taken from the outside, a close-up of a window, a brief establishing shot of the building,2 etc. Thus a kind of filmic articulation appears, which has no equivalent in photography: It is the denotation itself that is being constructed, organized, and to a certain extent codified (codified, not necessarily encoded). Lacking absolute laws, filmic intelligibility nevertheless depends on a certain number of dominant habits: A film put together haphazardly would not be understood.

I return to my initial observations: “Cinematographic language” is first of all the literalness of a plot. Artistic effects, even when they are substantially inseparable from the semic act by which the film tells us its story, nevertheless constitute another level of signification, which from the methodological point of view must come “later.”

PARADIGMATIC AND SYNTAGMATIC CATEGORIES

... In the cinema, where the number of images is indefinite. Several times indefinite, one should say. For the “pro-filmic” spectacles3 are themselves unlimited in number; the exact nature of lighting can be varied infinitely and by quantities that are nondiscrete; the same applies to the axial distance between the subject and the camera (in variations which are said to be scalar—that is, scale of the shot), to the camera angle, to the properties of the film and the focal length of the lens, and to the exact trajectory of the camera movements (including the stationary shot, which represents zero degree in this case). It suffices to vary one of these elements by a perceptible quantity to obtain another image. The shot is therefore not comparable to the word in a lexicon; rather it resembles a complete statement (of one or more sentences), in that it is already the result of an essentially free combination, a “speech” arrangement. ... The image is almost always assertive—and assertion is one of the great “modalities” of actualization, of the semic act. It appears therefore that the paradigmatic category in film is condemned to remain partial and fragmentary, at least as long as one tries to isolate it on the level of the image. This is naturally derived from the fact that creation plays a larger role in cinematographic language than it does in the handling of idioms: To “speak” a language is to use it, but to “speak” cinematographic language is to a certain extent to invent it. The speakers of ordinary language constitute a group of users; film-makers are a group of creators. On the other hand, movie spectators in turn constitute a group of users. That is why the semiotics of the cinema must frequently consider things from the point of view of spectator rather than of the film-maker. Étienne Souriau’s distinction between the filmic point of view and the “cinéastique,” or filmmaking, point of view is a very useful concept; film semiotics is mainly a filmic study. The situation has a rough equivalent in linguistics: Some linguists connect the speaker with the message, while the listener in some way “represents” the code, since he requires it to understand what is being said to him, while the speaker is presumed to know beforehand what he wants to say.

But, more than paradigmatic studies, it is the syntagmatic considerations that are at the center of the problems of filmic denotation. Although each image is a free creation, the arrangement of these images into an intelligible sequence—cutting and montage—brings us to the heart of the semiological dimension of film. It is a rather paradoxical situation: Those proliferating (and not very discrete!) units—the images—when it is a matter of composing a film, suddenly accept with reasonably good grace the constraint of a few large syntagmatic structures. While no image ever entirely resembles another image, the great majority of narrative films resemble each other in their principal syntagmatic figures. Filmic narrativity—since it has again crossed our path—by becoming stable through convention and repetition over innumerable films, has gradually shaped itself into forms that are more or less fixed, but certainly not immutable. These forms represent a synchronic “state” (that of the present cinema), but if they were to change, it could only be through a complete positive evolution, liable to be challenged—like those that, in spoken languages, produce diachronic transformations in the distribution of aspects and tenses. Applying de Saussure’s thought to the cinema, one could say that the large syntagmatic category of the narrative film can change, but that no single person can make it change over night. A failure of intellecction among the viewers would be the automatic sanctioning of a purely individual innovation, which the system would refuse to confirm. The originality of creative artists consists, here as elsewhere, in trick-

1I am speaking here as a semiotician and not as a psychologist. Comparative studies of visual perception, both in “real” and in filmic conditions, have indeed isolated all the optical distortions that differentiate between the photograph and the object. But these transformations, which obey the laws of optical physics, of the chemistry of emulsions and of retinal physiology, do not constitute a signifying system.

2Even if this over-all view is the only one shown us in the film, it is still the result of a choice. We know that the modern cinema has partially abandoned the practices of visual fragmentation and excessive montage in favor of the continuous shot (cf. the famous “shot-sequence” controversy). This condition modifies to the same extent the semiotics of filmic denotation, but it in no way dismisses it. Simply, cinematographic language, like other languages, has a diachronic side. A single “shot” itself contains several elements (example: switching from one view to another through a camera movement, and without montage).

3As defined by Étienne Souriau. The “pro-filmic” spectacle is whatever is placed in front of the camera, or whatever one places the camera in front of, in order to “shoot” it.
ing the code, or at least in using it ingeniously, rather than in attacking it directly or in violating it—and still less in ignoring it...

OTHER PROBLEMS

These very brief remarks provided an example of what the syntagmatic study of filmic denotation could be. There are important differences between the semiotics of the cinema and linguistics itself. Without repeating those mentioned elsewhere, let me recall some of the main points: Film contains nothing corresponding to the purely distinctive units of the second articulation; all of its units—even the simplest, like the dissolve and the wipe—are directly significant (and moreover, as I have already pointed out, they only occur in the actualized state). The commutations and other manipulations by which the semiotics of the cinema proceeds therefore affect the large significatory units. The "laws" of cinematographic language call for statements within a narrative, and not monemes within a statement, or still less phonemes within a moneme.

Contrary to what many of the theoreticians of the silent film declared or suggested ("Ciné langue," "visual Esperanto," etc.), the cinema is certainly not a language system (langue). It can, however, be considered as a language, to the extent that it orders signifying elements within ordered arrangements different from those of spoken idioms—and to the extent that these elements are not traced on the perceptual configurations of reality itself (which does not tell stories). Filmic manipulation transforms what might have been a mere visual transfer of reality into discourse. Derived from a kind of signification that is purely analogous and continuous—animated photography, cinematography—the cinema gradually shaped, in the course of its diachronic maturation, some elements of a proper semiotics, which remain scattered and fragmentary within the open field of simple visual duplication.

The "shot"—an already complex unit, which must be studied—remains an indispensable reference for the time being, in somewhat the same way that the "word" was during a period of linguistic research. It might be somewhat adventitious to compare the shot to the taxeme, in Louis Hjelmslev's sense, but one can consider that it constitutes the largest minimum segment (the expression is borrowed from André Martinet), since at least one shot is required to make a film, or part of a film—in the same way, a linguistic statement must be made up of at least one phoneme. To isolate several shots from a sequence is still, perhaps, to analyze the sequence; to remove several frames from a shot is to destroy the shot. If the shot is not the smallest unit of filmic signification (for a single shot may convey several informational elements), it is at least the smallest unit of the filmic chain.

One cannot conclude, however, that every minimum filmic segment is a shot. Besides shots, there are other minimum segments, optical devices—various dissolves, wipes, and so on—that can be defined as visual but not photographic elements. Whereas images have the objects of reality as referents, optical procedures, which do not represent anything, have images as referents (those contiguous in the syntagma). The relationship of these procedures to the actual shooting of the film is somewhat like that of morphemes to lexemes; depending on the context, they have two main functions: as "trick" devices (in this instance, they are sorts of semiological exponents influencing contiguous images), or as "punctuation." The expression "filmic punctuation," which use has ratified, must not make us forget that optical procedures separate large, complex statements and thus correspond to the articulations of the literary narrative (with its pages and paragraphs, for example), whereas actual punctuation—that is to say, typographical punctuation—separates sentences (period, exclamation mark, question mark, semicolon), and clauses (comma, colon, dash), possibly even "verbal bases," with or without characteristics (apostrophe, or dash, between two "words," and so on).

IN CONCLUSION

The concepts of linguistics can be applied to the semiotics of the cinema only with the greatest caution. On the other hand, the methods of linguistics—commutation, analytical breakdown, strict distinction between the signifier and the signified, between substance and form, between the relevant and the irrelevant, etc.—provide the semiotics of the cinema with a constant and precious aid in establishing units that, though they are still very approximate, are liable over time (and, one hopes, through the work of many scholars) to become progressively refined.

PROBLEMS OF DENOTATION IN THE FICTION FILM

The film semiologist tends, naturally, to approach his subject with methods derived from linguistics. Consequently wherever the language of cinematography differs from language itself, film semiology encounters its greatest obstacles. Let us begin immediately with the points of maximum difference. There are two of them: There is the problem of the motivation of signs and that of the continuity of meanings. Or, if one prefers, the question of the arbitrariness of signs (in the Saussurian sense) and the question of discrete units.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICATION IS ALWAYS MORE OR LESS MOTIVATED, NEVER ARBITRARY

Motivation occurs on two levels: on that of the relationship between the denotative signifiers and significates, and of the relations between the connotative signifiers and significates.

Denotation: The motivation is furnished by analogy—that is to say, by the perceptual similarity between the signifier and of the significate. This is equally true for the sound-track (the sound of a cannon on film resembles a real cannon sound) as for the image track (the image of a dog is like the dog).

We therefore have visual analogy and auditory analogy; for the cinema is derived from photography and from phonography, which are both modern technologies of mechanical duplication. Of course the duplication is never perfect; between the object and its image there are many perceptible differences, which film psycholo-
gists have studied. But, from the point of view of semiotics, it is not necessary that the signifier and the significate be identical. Simple analogy provides sufficient motivation.

For, even when it partially distorts its model, mechanical duplication does not analyze into specific units. There is no actual transformation of the object, but a simple partial distortion, which is purely perceptual.

Connotation: Connotative meanings are motivated, too, in the cinema. But in this case the motivation is not necessarily based on a relationship of perceptual analogy.

We will not insist upon the problems of cinematographic connotation here, for this is a study of denotation. Suffice it to say that cinematographic connotation is always symbolic in nature: The significate motivates the signifier but goes beyond it. The notion of motivated overtaking (dépassement motivé) may be used to define almost all filmic connotations. Similarly, one says that the cross is the symbol of Christianity because, although Christ died on a cross (the motivation), there are many more things in Christianity than there are in a cross (the "overtaking").

The partial motivation of filmic connotations does not prevent them from giving rise quite often to codifications or to conventions, which are more or less extended according to the case. Here is a simple example: In a talking film in which the hero has, among other diegetic peculiarities, the habit of whistling the first bars of a certain tune—and provided that this fact has been clearly impressed upon the spectator from the beginning of the film—the mere appearance of the tune on the sound track (in the visual absence of the hero himself) will be sufficient to suggest the totality of the character later in the film after the hero has gone on a long journey or even vanished. It is not without powerful connotations that the character may have been thus perceived. In this simplified example we see that the hero has not been "symbolized" by some arbitrary characteristic, but by a feature entirely his own (thus, lack of total arbitrariness). Yet in the whole character there was more than just the familiar tune; other features, which belong to him also, could have been chosen to "symbolize" him (and would have involved other connotations). There is, then, some arbitrariness in the relationship between the connotative significer (the melody) and the connotative significate (the character).

Even the subtlest and most ingenious cinematographic connotations are based then on this simple principle, which we might state as follows: A visual or an auditory theme—or an arrangement of visual and auditory themes—once it has been placed in its correct syntagmatic position within the discourse that constitutes the whole film, takes on a value greater than its own and is increased by the additional meaning it receives. But this addition itself is never entirely "arbitrary," for what the theme symbolizes in this manner is an integral situation or whole process, a part of which is fact it is, within the story told by the film (or which the spectator knows to be an actual part of life). In short, the connotative meaning extends over the denotative meaning, but without contradicting or ignoring it. Thus the partial arbitrariness; thus the absence of total arbitrariness. ... Many of the misunderstandings and arguments about these subjects derive from the fact that no one has yet attempted to draw up a half-way complete list of the different heterogeneous and superimposed codes co-present in any cultural activity of some importance, and no one has yet tried to clarify the precise organization of their interactions.*

In any event, it seems to me that one can distinguish at least two main types of signifying organization: cultural codes and specialized codes. The first define the culture of each social group; they are so ubiquitous and well "assimilated" that the viewers generally consider them to be "natural"—basic constituents of mankind itself (although they are clearly products, since they vary in space and time). The handling of these codes requires no special training—that is to say, no training other than that of living, and having been raised, in a society. On the other hand the codes I have called "specialized" concern more specific and restricted social activities. They appear more explicitly as codes, and they require a special training—to a large or small extent depending on the case (relatively "small" in the cinema)—that is to say, a training even the "native" person, possessing the culture of his group, cannot dispense with. . . .

A Frenchman, born and raised in France, does not need to be specially taught the gestures expressing anger, refusal, resigned acceptance, or the gesture that stands for "Come here!"—but, though he is French, he will need to be specially taught the sign language of the deaf and dumb (in his own language), otherwise he will never know it.

The purely cinematographic signifying figures studied here (montage, camera movements, optical effects, "rhetoric of the screen," interaction of visual and auditory elements, and so on) constitute specialized codes—although relatively "easy" ones, as we will see later—that function above and beyond photographic and phonographic analogy. The iconological, perceptual, and other codes are cultural codes, and they function in good part within photographic and phonographic analogy, as Umberto Eco, to whom the hypothesis advanced in these pages owes much, has rightly pointed out.

So far, I have been speaking about denotation (the literal sense of the film). But, among the large body of connoted significations in the cinema (the "symbolic sense" of all varieties), there are a certain number that, outside of the specifically cinematographic codifications, intrude into the film by means of perceptual analogy each time an object or an ordering of objects (visual or auditory) "symbolizes" within the film what it would have symbolized outside of the film—that is to say, within culture (with the chance that it will carry in addition, and only in the film, symbolic significations that will then derive from its location within the cinematographic discourse proper). "Objects" (and characters must also be included)—that is to say, the different basic elements of filmic discourse—do not enter the film in a virgin state; they carry with them, before even "cinematographic language" can intervene, a great deal more than their simple literal identity—which does not prevent the spectator

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*The discussions that have taken place in recent years about the semiotics of the cinema have made it appear more and more clearly that the cinema as a whole is a locus where many signifying systems are superimposed and interwoven—and that cinematographic language is only one of these systems.
belonging to a given culture from deciphering this “increment” at the same time that he identifies the object. . . .

THE CINEMA AS SUCH HAS NOTHING CORRESPONDING TO THE DOUBLE ARTICULATION OF VERBAL LANGUAGES

Let us note first that the cinema has no distinctive units (I mean distinctive units of its own).* It does not have anything corresponding to the phoneme or to the relevant phonetic feature on the level of expression, nor, on the level of content, does it have anything equivalent to the sense in Algirdas Julien Greimas’s sense, or in Bernard Pottier’s sense.

Even with respect to the signifying units, the cinema is initially deprived of discrete elements. It proceeds by whole “blocks of reality,” which are actualized with their total meaning in the discourse. These blocks are the “shots.” The discrete units identifiable in the filmic discourse on another level—for, as we shall see, there is another level—are not equivalent to the first articulation of spoken languages.

Certainly, it is true that montage is in a sense an analysis, a sort of articulation of the reality shown on the screen. Instead of showing us an entire landscape, a filmmaker will show us successively a number of partial views, which are broken down and ordered according to a very precise intention. It is well known that the nature of the cinema is to transform the world into discourse.

But this kind of articulation is not a true articulation in the linguistic sense. Even the most partial and fragmentary “shot” (what film people call the close-up) still presents a complete segment of reality. The close-up is only a shot taken closer than other shots.

It is true that the film sequence is a real unit—that is to say, a sort of coherent syntagma within which the “shots” react (semantically) to each other. This phenomenon recalls up to a certain point the manner in which words react to each other within a sentence, and that is why the first theoreticians of the cinema often spoke of the shot as a word, and the sequence as a sentence. But these were highly erroneous identifications, and one can easily list five radical differences between the filmic “shot” and the linguistic word:

(1) Shots are infinite in number, contrary to words, which can be formulated in a verbal language.
(2) Shots are the creations of the film-maker, unlike words (which pre-exist in lexicons), but similar to statements (which are in principle the invention of the speaker).

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* I mean to say that cinematographic language as such lacks distinctive units. For, as a totality, the cinema contains various other signifying systems, each one of which behaves differently in relation to the problem of articulations.

The most obvious example—there are others less apparent—of the superposition of codes within the total cinematographic institution (superpositions that complicate the problem of the articulations in the cinema) is provided by the occurrence of the verbal element in talking films: The effect of its intervention is to integrate the doubly articulated significations into the global message of the film, but not into the specific language of the “cinema.”

(3) The shot presents the receiver with a quantity of undefined information, contrary to the word. From this point of view, the shot is not even equivalent to the sentence. Rather, it is like the complex statement of undefined length (how is one to describe a film shot completely by means of natural language?).
(4) The shot is an actualized unit, a unit of discourse, an assertion, unlike the word (which is a purely virtual lexical unit), but like the statement, which always refers to reality or a reality (even when it is interrogative or jussive). The image of a house does not signify “house,” but “Here is a house”; the image contains a sort of index of actualization, by the mere fact that it occurs in a film.
(5) 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. The important linguistic phenomenon of the clarification of present units by absent units hardly comes into play in the cinema. Semantically, this confirms what the aestheticians of the cinema have frequently observed: namely, that the cinema is an “art of presence” (the dominance of the image, which “shuts out” everything external to itself).

The filmic “shot” therefore resembles the statement rather than the word. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that it is equivalent to the statement. For there are still great differences between the shot and the linguistic statement. Even the most complex statement is reducible, in the final analysis, to discrete elements (words, morphemes, phonemes, relevant features), which are fixed in number and in nature.

To be sure, the filmic shot is also the result of an ordering of several elements (for example, the different visual elements in the image—what is sometimes called the interior montage), but these elements are indefinite in number and undefined in nature, like the shot itself. The analysis of a shot consists in progressing from a nondiscrete whole to smaller nondiscrete wholes: One can decompose a shot, but one cannot reduce it.

All that can be affirmed, therefore, is that a shot is less unlike a statement than a word, but it does not necessarily resemble a statement.

THE LARGE SYNTAGMATIC CATEGORY OF THE IMAGE TRACK

So far, I have examined only the status of “cinematographic grammar,” and I have said nothing about its content. I have not given the table of the codified orderings of various kinds used in film.

It is not possible here to give this table in its complete form, with all the explanations required by each one of the indicated orderings, and with the principles of commutation between them (and consequently to enumerate them).

Let us content ourselves, then, with the almost unpolished “result”—the table itself in a summarized form—and only that part of it that outlines the large syntag-
momic category of the image track (i.e., the codified and signifying orderings on the level of the *large* units of the film, and ignoring the elements of sound and speech). Naturally this problem constitutes only one of the chapters of "cinematographic syntax."

In order to determine the number and the nature of the main syntagmatic types used in current films, one must start from common observation (existence of the "scene," "sequence," "alternate montage," etc.) as well as on certain "presemiotic" analyses by critics, historians, and theoreticians of the cinema ("tables of montage," various classifications, etc.). This preliminary work must account for several points of importance—that is why it in no way precludes the viewing of numerous films—and it must then be organized into a coherent body—that is to say, into a list of all the main types of image-orderings occurring in films under the various headings into which they are naturally classified.

One thus arrives at a first "tabulation" of the syntagmatic components of films—a chart remaining fairly close to the concrete filmic material, but which, from the point of view of semiological theory, is as yet insufficiently developed.

At present, then, I distinguish eight main types of autonomous segments, that is, "sequences" (but henceforth I will reserve the term sequence for only two of these eight types, numbers 7 and 8).

The autonomous segment is a subdivision of the first order in film; it is therefore a part of a film, and not a part of a part of a film. (If an autonomous section is composed of five successive shots, each one of these shots is a part of the whole film—that is to say, a nonautonomous segment). It is clear nevertheless that the "autonomy" of the autonomous segments themselves is not an independence, since each autonomous segment derives its final meaning in relation to the film as a whole, the latter being the *maximum syntagma* of the cinema.

In distinguishing between the "shot" and the "sequence," everyday language clearly indicates that there are two things in the cinema (without prejudice to eventual intermediate levels): On the one hand there is the minimum segment, which is the shot, and on the other hand the autonomous segment. This, as we will see shortly, does not prevent a minimum segment from being occasionally autonomous.

Let us now examine our eight syntagmatic types.

1. Autonomous shot (Subtypes: the sequence shot plus four kinds of insert)

2. Parallel Syntagma

3. Bracket Syntagma

4. Descriptive Syntagma

5. Alternate (Narrative) Syntagma

6. Scene

7. Episodic Sequence

8. Ordinary Sequence

*That is to say, on a level roughly corresponding to that of the "sequence" in the usual sense of that word. The term "large syntagmatic category" is therefore meant to indicate the difference between this approach and, for example, a shot-by-shot analysis, or an analysis within the shot itself. But one must not forget that an even broader syntagmatic level also exists: groups of sequences, "main parts" of the film, return or repetition of extended motifs, etc.
The sentence is a unit smaller than the paragraph, but some paragraphs contain only one sentence (in linguistics the same could be said of the relation between the phoneme and the moneme, or between the moneme and the statement: in other words, we are dealing with a phenomenon that is common in semiotics). In short, some of the autonomous segments of a film are syntagmas, and others are not; conversely, some of the shots in a film are autonomous and others are not.

The autonomous shot includes several subtypes: There is, on the one hand, the famous "sequence shot" of the modern cinema (an entire scene treated in a single shot; the shot derives its autonomy from the unity of "action"); on the other hand, there are the various kinds of shot that owe their autonomy to their status as syntagmatic interpolations and could be collectively termed inserts. If one selects the cause of their interpolative nature as a principle of classification, one will notice that up to now there have been only four types of insert in the cinema: the nondiegetic insert (i.e., image having a purely comparative function; showing an object which is external to the action of the film); the subjective insert (i.e., image conveying not the present instance, but an absent moment experienced by the hero of the film. Examples: images of memory, dream, fear, premonition, etc.); the displaced diegetic insert (an image that, while remaining entirely "real," is displaced from its normal filmic position and is purposely intruded into a foreign syntagma. Example: Within a sequence showing the pursuers, a single shot of the pursued is inserted); and, finally, the explanatory insert (the enlarged detail, in a magnifying-glass effect. The detail is removed from its empirical space and is presented in the abstract space of a mental operation. Example: close-up of a visiting card or letter).

(2 and 3) Among the syntagmas (autonomous segments composed of several shots), a second criterion allows us to distinguish between nonchronological and chronological syntagmas. In the first variety, the temporal relationship between the facts presented in the different images is not defined by the film (i.e., temporary withdrawal of the significate of temporal denotation); in the second kind it is.

I have so far identified two main types of nonchronological syntagma. One of them is well known by film aestheticians and is called "parallel montage sequence" (I prefer to say parallel syntagma, to save the word "sequence" for other uses). Definition: montage brings together and interleaves two or more alternating "motifs," but no precise relationship (whether temporal or spatial) is assigned to them—at least on the level of denotation. This kind of montage has a direct symbolic value (scenes of the life of the rich interwoven with scenes of the life of the poor, images of tranquility alternating with images of disturbance, shots of the city and of the country, of the sea and of wheat fields, and so on).

The second type of nonchronological syntagma has not (to my knowledge) been identified before, but it is easily isolated in films. Definition: a series of very brief scenes representing occurrences that the film gives as typical samples of a same order of reality, without in any way chronologically locating them in relation to each other in order to emphasize their presumed kinship within a category of facts that the film-maker wants to describe in visual terms. None of these little scenes is treated with the full syntagmatic breadth it might have commanded; it is taken as an element in a system of allusions, and therefore it is the series, rather than the individual, that the film takes into account. Thus the series is equivalent to a more ordi-
ject of discourse; the same object can either be described or told, depending on the logic of what is said about it.

(5) All chronological syntagmas other than the descriptive syntagmas are narrative syntagmas—that is to say, syntagmas in which the temporal relationship between the objects seen in the images contains elements of consecutiveness and not only of simultaneity. But within the narrative syntagmas there are two divisions: The syntagmas may interweave several distinct temporal progressions, or, on the contrary, it may consist of a single succession encompassing all of the images. Thus, the alternate narrative syntagma (or alternate syntax) is distinguished from the various sorts of linear narrative syntagmas.

The alternate syntagma is well known to theoreticians of the cinema under the names “alternate montage,” “parallel montage,” “synchronism,” etc., depending on the case. Typical example: shot of the pursuers, followed by a shot of the pursued, and back to a shot of the pursuers. Definition: The montage presents alternately two or more series of events in such a way that within each series the temporal relationships are consecutive, but that, between the series taken as wholes, the temporal relationship is one of simultaneity (which can be expressed by the formula “Alternating of images equals simultaneity of occurrences”).

(6) Within the linear narrative syntagmas (i.e., a single succession linking together all the acts seen in the images), a new criterion lets us make yet another distinction: Succession may be continuous (without break or ellipsis) or discontinuous (jumps). Naturally one must not count as true ellipses—that is to say, as diegetic breaks—what might be called simple camera breaks (i.e., temporal continuity is interrupted by a displacing of the camera, or by a cutaway, and is then taken up again at the exact chronological point it had meanwhile reached).

When succession is continuous (i.e., with no diegetic breaks), we have the only kind of syntagma in the cinema that resembles a “scene” in the theater—or a scene in everyday life—that is to say, it represents a spatio-temporal integrality experienced as being without “flaws” (by “flaw” I mean those brusque effects of appearance or disappearance that are the frequent corollaries of the multiplicity of shots, which film psychologists have studied and which constitute one of the major differences between filmic perception and real perception). This is the scene properly speaking (or simply scene). It was the only construction known to the early film-makers; it still exists today, but merely as one type among other types (it is therefore commutable). Example: conversation scenes (the presence on the soundtrack of a coherent succession of linguistic statements has the effect of rendering a unitary, “flawless” visual construction more probable—though not obligatory).

Thus, through means that are already filmic (separate shots that are later combined), the scene reconstructs a unit still experienced as being “concrete”: a place, a moment in time, an action, compact and specific. The signifier is fragmentary in the scene—a number of shots, all of them only partial “profiles” (Abschattungen)—but the significates is unified and continuous. The profiles are interpreted as being taken from a common mass—for what one calls “viewing a film” is in fact a very complex phenomenon, constantly involving three distinct activities (perception, restructuring of the visual field, and immediate memory), which propel each other on, and, as fast as it comes in, never cease working on the information they furnish to themselves.

(7 and 8) Distinct from, and opposed to, the scene are the various kinds of linear narrative syntagmas in which the temporal order of the facts presented is discontinuous. They are the sequences proper.

Within the sequence proper (i.e., single discontinuous temporal order), one finds two species. The temporal discontinuity may be unorganized and, so to speak, scattered—and the viewer skips the moments that have, to his mind, no direct bearing on the plot: This is the ordinary sequence, a syntagmatic type very common in the cinema. On the other hand, the discontinuity may be organized and may therefore be the principle of structure and intelligibility in the sequence, in which case we have what I would call the episodic sequence. Definition: The sequence strings together a number of very brief scenes, which are usually separated from each other by optical devices (dissolves, etc.) and which succeed each other in chronological order.* None of these allusive little scenes is treated with the syntagmatic thoroughness it might have commanded, for the scenes are taken not as separate instances but only in their totality, which has the status of an ordinary sequence and which therefore constitutes an autonomous segment. In its extreme form (that is, when the successive episodes are separated by a long diegetic duration), this construction is used to condense gradual progressions. In Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane (1941), the sequence portraying the gradual deterioration of the relationship between the hero and his first wife shows a chronological series of quick allusions to dinners shared by the couple in an atmosphere that is increasingly affectionate; the scenes, treated in a succession of pan shots, are connected over intervening periods of months. In a less spectacular but structurally identical form, the episodic sequence is used to represent, through a series of regularly distributed (and less “striking”) abridgements, various kinds of minor diegetic progression of less extended total duration by systematically isolating some of their succeeding “moments.”

The ordinary sequence and the episodic sequence are both sequences in the proper—including the extracinematographic—sense of the word: the concept of a single concatenation plus the concept of discontinuity. However, in the episodic sequence, each one of the images constituting the series appears distinctly as the symbolic summary of one stage in the fairly long evolution condensed by the total sequence. In the ordinary sequence, each one of the units in the narrative simply presents one of the unskipped moments of the action. Consequently, in the first case each image stands for more than itself and is perceived as being taken from a group of other possible images representing a single phase of a progression.

For all that, the ordinary sequence itself already constitutes a more specifically filmic narrative unit, and one that is more removed from the conditions of real perception, than the film scene (and a fortiori the theater scene); unlike the scene, the sequence is not the locus of the coincidence—even in principle—of screen time and diegetic time (time of the signifier and time of the significate). The sequence is based on the unity of a more complex action (although it is still single, contrary to what occurs, for example, in the parallel syntagma or in the bracket syntagma), an action that “skips” those portions of itself it intends to leave out and that is there-

*That is the major difference between the episodic sequence and the bracket syntagma. Otherwise, as one can readily see, the two types have many characteristics in common.
fore apt to unfold in several different locations (unlike the scene). A typical example is the sequence of escape (in which there is an approximate unity of place, but one that is essential rather than literal: that is, the “escape-location,” that paradoxical unit, the mobile locus). Thus, one encounters diegetic breaks within the sequence (and not just camera interruptions, as in the scene), but these hiatuses are considered insignificant—at least on the level of denotation—and are to be distinguished from those indicated by the faces or by any other optical device between two autonomous segments. Indeed, the latter are reputed to be over-significant, even in denotation: We are told nothing, yet we are informed that a great deal could be told us (the fade is a segment that shows nothing but is very visible), and the “skipped moments” emphasized in this way are presumed to have influenced the events narrated by the film (unlike diegetic breaks within the sequence) and to be therefore necessary in some way, despite their absence, to the literal intellection of whatever follows . . .

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LARGE SYNTAGMATIC CATEGORY AND THE CONCEPT OF CINEMATOGRAPHIC “MONTAGE”

Each of the eight main syntagmatic types—with the exception of the autonomous shot, where the problem does not occur—may be effected in one of two ways: either by recourse to montage proper (as was usually the case in the cinema of the past) or by means of subtler forms of syntagmatic ordering (as is often the case in the modern cinema). Combinations that avoid collage-juxtaposition (i.e., continuity shooting, long shots, sequence shots, use of the “wide” screen, and so on) are nonetheless syntagmatic constructions, examples of montage in the broad sense, as Jean Mitry has clearly shown. It is true that the concept of montage as irresponsible, magical, and all-powerful manipulation has become obsolete. However, montage as the structuring of intelligible coherence by means of various “conjectures” is by no means “outmoded,” since film is always discourse, and therefore the locus of many different actualized elements.

Example: A filmic description can be made in a single “shot,” apart from any kind of montage, simply through camera movements: The intelligible structure ordering the different visual elements is the same as that linking the different shots within a classical descriptive syntax. Montage proper is an elementary form of the large syntagmatic category of film, for each “shot” theoretically isolates a single visual element. Thus the relation between visual elements coincides with the relation between shots, rendering analysis easier than in the complex (and culturally “modern”) forms of the cinematographic syntagmatic category.

Consequence: A deeper analysis of the syntagmatic category in modern films would require revising the status of the autonomous shot—at the very least in its form of “sequence shot”—because, up to a certain point, it may contain image structures that, in the seven other syntagmatic types, continue to exist in a free “undetermined” state. (This is the phenomenon expressed very approximately, in a simple juxtaposition of words, by the term “sequence shot.”)

REMARK ON THE DIACHRONIC EVOLUTION OF CINEMATOGRAPHIC CODES

The large syntagmatic category of the cinema is not immutable; it has a diachronic aspect. It evolves distinctly faster than languages do, a circumstance derived from the fact that art and language are more closely interrelated in film than in the verbal field. The creative film-maker exerts more influence on the diachronic evolution of cinematographic language than the imaginative writer on the evolution of his idiom, for idiom may exist in the absence of art, whereas the cinema must be an art to become a language with a partial denotative code. Remember, also, that film-makers constitute a limited social group (creative group), whereas the users of language are coextensive as a group with society itself (user group).

Nevertheless the large syntagmatic category of the cinema ensures a codification that is coherent for every diachronic “state.” Too great a deviation from this codification at any given moment results in the inability to understand—for the mass of the spectators—the film’s literal meaning (example: certain “avant-garde” films).

“NATURAL LOGIC” AND CONVENTIONAL CODIFICATION IN FILMIC ORDERING

Cinematographic “grammar” is codified, but it is not arbitrary. The distinction between the arbitrary and the motivated does not at all coincide, in this case, with that between the “free” and the codified.

The syntagmatic types in which denotation is not analogous retain a certain amount of naturalness in their relationship of the significate to the signifier. Thus, in the alternate syntax, denotation is not analogous—since the images alternate while the facts are presumably simultaneous and not alternating—yet, it has been shown26 that the intelligibility of this kind of montage is based on a spontaneous form of interpolation that the spectator practices quite naturally (i.e., as soon as the rhythm of the alternating becomes sufficiently rapid, the spectator is able to guess that a series of events, A, is continuing to unfold in the diegesis, while only a fragment of the series of events, B, is being shown on the screen).

But this “natural” characteristic is not total, and therefore we can speak only of partial codification. Among the possible image structures (a fairly large number of which should exist), only a few are conventionalized; among the more or less natural (or logical) patterns of intelligibility on which the cinema could build its syntagmatic orderings, only a very few are retained—and they become effective patterns of intellection and are almost always grasped by the normal, adult spectator belonging to a society acquainted with the cinema. It is striking that, compared to all the conceivable image orderings, only a very small number is actually used. Just as in semantics there is the arbitrariness of lexicalization, in the cinema one has the arbitrariness of grammaticalization.

This alliance between natural logic and conventional codification has a consequence that has been singled out, with varying degrees of clarity, by psychosociologists, educators, filmologists, and the specialists of “popular animation”: The practice of the cinema, both in its creating and in its viewing, requires a certain
apprenticeship, but this apprenticeship is very slight compared to the one language demands. On the phylogenetic level, the evolution of cinematographic language took approximately twenty years (from 1895 to 1915 roughly: from Lumière to Griffith)—this is both a long time and a very short time. On the ontogenetic level, it is known that, before approximately the age of twelve years, a child is not able to grasp the literal meaning of an ordinary modern feature film in its whole continuity, but after that age he is gradually able to do so without having to undergo massive schooling such as the learning of a foreign language (or even a thorough knowledge of the mother tongue) requires. This is also true of adults in societies without cinema (black Africa, etc.): At first contact, they do not immediately understand the complex films of our societies, but later they are able to grasp them quite rapidly. All investigations agree on these points.


The reader will perhaps have observed in the course of this article (and especially in the definition of the different types of autonomous segment) that it is no easy matter to decide whether the large syntagmatic category in film involves the cinema or the cinematographic narrative. For all the units I have isolated are located in the film but in relation to the plot. This perpetual see-saw between the screen instance (which signifies) and the diegetic instance (which is signified) must be accepted and even erected into a methodological principle, for it, and only it, renders commutation possible, and thus identification of the units (in this case, the autonomous segments).

One will never be able to analyze film by speaking directly about the diegesis (as in some of the film societies, ciné clubs, in France and elsewhere, where the discussion is centered around the plot and the human problems it implies), because that is equivalent to examining the signifiers without taking the signifiants into consideration. On the other hand, isolating the units without considering the diegesis as a whole (as in the "montage tables" of some of the theoreticians of the silent cinema) is to study the signifiers without the signifiants—since the nature of narrative film is to narrate.

The necessity of this see-sawing I have just described is nothing other than the consequence of an underlying cultural and social fact: The cinema, which could have served a variety of uses, in fact is most often used to tell stories—to the extent that even supposedly nonnarrative films (short documentary films, educational films, etc.) are governed essentially by the same semiological mechanisms that govern the "feature films."

Had the cinema not become thoroughly narrative, its grammar would undoubtedly be entirely different (and would perhaps not even exist). The reverse of this coin, however, is that a given narrative receives a very different semiological treatment in the cinema than it would in a novel, in classical ballet, in a cartoon, and so on.

There are therefore two distinct enterprises, neither of which can replace the other: On the one hand, there is the semiotics of the narrative film, such as the one I am attempting to develop; on the other hand, there is the structural analysis of actual narrativity—that is to say, of the narrative taken independently from the vehicles carrying it (the film, the book, etc.). ... The narrated event, which is a sign in the semiotics of narrative vehicles (and notably of the cinema), becomes a sign in the semiotics of narrativity.

CONCLUSION

The concept of a "cinematographic grammar" is very much out of favor today; one has the impression, indeed, that such a thing cannot exist. But that is only because it has not been looked for in the right place. Students have always implicitly referred themselves to the normative grammar of particular languages (namely, their maternal languages), but the linguistic and grammatical phenomenon is much faster than any single language and is concerned with the great and fundamental figures of the transmission of all information. Only a general linguistics and a general semiotics (both nonnormative and simply analytical disciplines) can provide the study of cinematographic language with the appropriate methodological "models." It does not suffice merely to observe that there is nothing in the cinema corresponding to the consecutive clause in French, or to the Latin adverb, which are extremely particular linguistic phenomena, are not necessary, and are not universal. The dialogue between the film theoretician and the semiotist can commence only beyond the level of such idiomatic specifications or such restrictive prescriptions. The fact that must be understood is that films are understood. Iconic analogy alone cannot account for the intelligibility of the co-occurrences in filmic discourse. That is the function of the large syntagmatic category.