



1981

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Recommended Citation

Salvaggio, J. L. (1981). Lotman: Semiotics of the Cinema. 7(3), 87-91. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol7/iss3/7>

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Figure 5 Dancers hold spears, on the end of which the goats' heads will be hoisted, representing the heads of enemies. The goats are then beheaded in the course of the dance.



Figure 6 Kyagba eats the first bit of cooked meat, from the tip of the war spear. After this, the general dancing and feasting goes on for the rest of the day.



Jurij Lotman. *Semiotics of the Cinema.* Mark E. Suino, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976. \$3.00 (paper).

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While American scholars continue to attend primarily to the semiotic and structuralist writings emanating from Western Europe, an equally large body of semiotic work is simultaneously being produced in Eastern Europe. In addition to Vladimir Propp's (1968) structuralist study of folklore, V. V. Ivanov (1976) has written on cinema and the history of semiotics, and Boris Uspensky (1975, 1976) has written on visual iconography. Other significant semioticians currently writing in Eastern Europe include A. M. Pjatigorsky (1974) and Peter Bogatyrev (1976).¹

Jurij Mikhaylovich Lotman is perhaps the most prolific representative of the Moscow-Tartu semiotic group.² As a professor of Russian Literature at Tartu State University, Lotman has already written well over one hundred articles, most of which have not been translated into English.³

If Christian Metz's goal in *Film Language* (1974) was to develop a structural-semiotic methodology for textual analysis of the narrative film, Lotman's objective is to advance a theory of how film functions as a language. Unfortunately, the same rigorous analysis and use of cybernetics and information theory which characterized Lotman's *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977) is not found in *Semiotics of the Cinema*. Rather than developing a theory of cinema comparable to his complex study of poetry and literature, Lotman has simply elevated Eisenstein's ideas into a semiotic system which does little to explain the process of film communication.

Lotman's failure to clarify the major problems of film-communication casts an unwarranted doubt on semiotic methodology in general. This is unfortunate, since semioticians were the first to seriously raise fundamental questions concerning film syntax and semantics. Though Lotman has covered many of these questions in this small monograph, I shall limit this review to an examination of his shortcomings in four areas: In what sense is film a language? What is the relationship between film and reality? Does film have a syntax? And finally, how does film achieve meaning?

I believe it can safely be said that the first question which arises for the film semiotician is whether the film narrative qualifies as a true language. Soviet semioticians take a characteristically diverse approach and begin merely with a broad definition of language. Lotman, for example, defines *language* as "an ordered communicative [serving to transmit information] sign system" (p. 1) and then notes that "language ensures the exchange, preservation and accumulation of information in the society which employs it" (*ibid.*). In addition to natural languages (Estonian, Russian, Czech, French, etc.), there are such languages as tomtoms, traffic lights, painting, and cinema. Unfortunately, Lotman does not elaborate on his definition of language as he did in *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, where he distinguished among natural languages, artificial languages (languages of science), the languages of conventional signals (road signs), and secondary languages. Since all the arts including the cinema are, for Lotman, secondary languages or secondary modeling systems, it will be helpful to draw from his earlier work. According to Lotman, natural language, because of its structure, "exerts a powerful influence over the human psyche and over many aspects of social life" (1977:9). While secondary modeling systems do not reproduce all aspects of natural languages, they are constructed "on the model of language." Cinema is, therefore, a secondary modeling system which can be examined as though it were a language. Lotman's definition of film language is considerably different from that of Metz, who considered film to be "a sort of language" which could not qualify as a true language (1974). This view also differs considerably from that of Sol Worth, who held the view that, based on Chomsky's criteria, film is not a language (1969). Though Metz and Worth agree that film is not a true language, they both use the "language analogy" as a heuristic device for semiotic analysis.

It should be pointed out that Lotman's theory of cinema does not stand or fall on his argument that film is a language in the sense that Metz's theory does. Rather, Lotman seems only to be using the analogy in order to convince the reader that cinema has all the complex characteristics of natural languages. Thus, in the Introduction, Lotman admits that his broad definition "embraces the entire area of communicative systems in human society" (p. 3). He then notes that a different question is whether cinema constitutes a unique language of its own. Clearly, Lotman sidesteps the difficult problem of demonstrating that film is a language in the way that Russian is a language. Nor does he conclude, as Metz did, that cinema is a kind of language (one lacking a *langue*). Instead, Lotman only attempts to show that cinema is a language in the sense that tomtoms and street signals are languages.

From the above view of film language one is led to a theory of the cinematic sign. Lotman is either unaware of Peirce's sign trichotomy (iconic, indexical, and symbolic)

or simply prefers to divide signs into only two categories: conventional and pictorial (iconic). Lotman notes that while iconic signs are more comprehensible, conventional signs require knowledge of a code (p. 6) and easily acquire a syntax (p. 7). "Conventional signs are capable of *telling*, of creating narrative texts, while iconic signs are restricted to the function of *naming*" (p. 7). With Umberto Eco (1976a) and Nelson Goodman (1968), Lotman agrees that within cinema the two signs coexist. Lotman, like most semioticians of visual communication, finds it necessary to show that photographs and paintings are conventional since only conventional signs require the reader to know a code (a fundamental characteristic of any language). Goodman refers to conventional signs as symbols and to pictorial signs as iconic. He then goes to great lengths to point out that iconic signs (e.g., pictures and photographs) are also symbols: "Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time" (1968:38). Eco has likewise shown that iconic images are similar to the objects they represent only by virtue of convention (1976a:204-208). Lotman has thus used a different set of terms to convince the reader that pictures are coded, and that therefore cinema must be learned, but the observation was made by Goodman as early as 1968.

Lotman's next target is an old and elusive problem which has never failed to attract the attention of film scholars—the continuing debate over the relationship between film and reality. Krakauer (1965) and Bazin (1958) argued that film was based on photography; thus, a realistic presentation was essential for cinematic art. On the other side, Arnheim (1969; orig. ed. 1928) and Eisenstein (1949) held the view that reality must be transformed into artistic signs if cinema was to be an art form.

Lotman follows the formalistic tradition with a slight twist. He is less convinced that a realistic film is not art than he is concerned that cinema's ability to provide the illusion of reality is a deterrent to viewing the medium as a language. According to Lotman, photography and film reduce the text to the automatism of the laws of technical representation and had to be rescued from this tendency. Thus, each technical advancement from sound to color was necessarily freed from these technical laws prior to being subjected to the laws of creation. For Lotman, film's ability to create the illusion of reality provides the viewer with a dual paradox in relation to the text. While shedding tears over the genuineness of the text, the viewer also realizes that it is an "imaginary event." There is little doubt that Lotman is correct on this point, though Edward Bullough (1970) said approximately the same thing in his classic article on aesthetic distance.

What Lotman does add to the ongoing debate concerning cinema and realism is a unique answer to why Italian neorealism (a realistic movement) is considered an artistic achievement. Formalists have never satisfac-

torily accounted for neorealism. Eisenstein died before the neorealistic period, and Arnheim has chosen not to defend his earlier position.

Lotman argues that neorealism was a movement characterized by "refusals" (refusals to use stereotypes, professional actors, etc.). He then notes that the movement could not have been effective without a "remembered background of cinema art of the opposite type" (p. 21). Put in another way, neorealism was artistic because the realism was perceived as artistic (different) when compared with the conventions of the previous period. "Without cinematography of historical epics, film operas, westerns or Hollywood 'stars' it [neorealism] loses a good deal of its artistic meaning" (ibid.).

As a "formalist," Lotman is overly influenced by Eisenstein and dialectics. Later we shall see that the antecedents to this approach can probably be taken back to Jakobsen (1978), who was the first in the Soviet Union to utilize Saussure's notion of similarities and differences to explain the poetic process. This line of thinking has been pervasive since the Formalist period in the U.S.S.R., no doubt because of its similarity to Marxist dialectics.

There is certainly some truth in the theory that our acceptance of certain movements as artistically significant is mostly a matter of institutionalization. In this case, society has acknowledged neorealism to be different from previous film movements. By drawing attention to the dialectic nature of film movements, Lotman reminds us of the role which the history of cinema plays in determining what is aesthetic. His theory, however, is problematic in two ways. First, if this line of thinking were carried to the extreme one could argue that the disaster genre must be artistic since it was preceded by a period of realistic American cinema. Second, Lotman's theory cannot account for the success or failure of an *individual film* within the movement.

Lotman's theory of cinematic syntax is equally weak. Following Kuleshov and Eisenstein, he argues that cinema does not record the world but, through the "shot," records only a discrete segment (temporal and spatial) in the shape of the screen. The rectangular shot, then, is the significant unit which constitutes the vocabulary of cinema. Furthermore, because the viewer understands that shots are being presented as an "ordered text" consisting of "prearranged" shots, cinema has a syntax. "Knowing that we are watching an artistic story, i.e., a string of signs, we necessarily disassemble the flow of visual impressions into meaningful elements" (p. 25). Lotman's notion of syntax is simply that the "shot," when ordered and understood to be ordered by the viewer, is a meaningful sequence. While one would not disagree about the meaningfulness of an ordered sequence of shots, this does not constitute a syntax. Lotman fails to indicate what a nonsyntactical sequence would look like or what the rules of its grammar might be. When compared with Worth's seminal study (1968) of sequencing and cultural constructs that determine the manner in which a film

is structured and understood or John Carroll's study (1977) of the cognitive/perceptual processes involved in film sequences achieving synonymy, Lotman's work on syntax seems especially superficial.

Having presented a quasi-case for a cinematic syntax, Lotman turns to the problem of semantics. The shot achieves meaning of two kinds: the first based on its relationship with the real world and the second based on manipulation of the image (lighting, change of speed, etc.) through a series of shots. While the first type of meaning presents the viewer with a semantic bundle based on repetition and a system of expectation (due to our perception of the real world), the second violates the anticipation by singling out a new semantic bundle in the next shot. "The mechanism of similarities and differences determines the inner structure of film language" (p. 31). Basically, Lotman's notion of similarities and differences is a semiotic elaboration of Eisenstein's theory of montage. According to Eisenstein, in dialectical montage both shots and discrete elements of a shot (e.g., tones, movements, lines) are set in conflict in order to operate as minimal units of signification which could generate an infinite number of higher conceptual units.⁴

Shots, however, are unlike the so-called discrete units within a shot. Eco (1976b) and Pasolini (1975) have both discussed the notion of discrete units which might be minimal units of signification, but both have concluded that semiotics is yet too young a science to discover how these units might be identified. There is a clear sense in which a shot is a semantic bundle similar to a cluster of morphemes or even words, while a line or color is closer to a phoneme — with the exception that shots are analogic rather than digital. Lotman perhaps recognizes this as he insists that "only in a series of shots appearing one after the other can we discover the mechanisms of differences and similarities, thanks to which some secondary sign units emerge" (p. 31). What Lotman refers to as the first sign unit emerges with the shot while the second sign unit emerges with the clash of two shots. The first achieves meaning by virtue of what it represents and the second by virtue of film language (montage). Whereas Eisenstein failed to distinguish between shots as semantic units and discrete elements of a shot as nonsemantic units, Lotman recognizes that an expression requires a signifier to function as a sign.

Having established two types of signs, Lotman notes that there are two tendencies in cinema. The first is the tendency to utilize similar elements of film language based on the repetition of everyday experience. The second, "violating (but not destroying!) this system of anticipations, singles out semantic bundles in the text" (ibid.). These two tendencies, then, parallel Saussure's notion of differences and groupings, according to Lotman. The viewer recognizes these differences due to the two types of "elements" in film language: those which are "marked" and those which are "unmarked." Examples of marked elements include the extreme close shot, slow motion,

and negative shots. Unmarked elements are those "cleansed of associations," that is, those which are recognized by virtue of our experience of reality. For an element to become meaningful it must violate expectations, a technique the Formalists referred to as *ostranenie* (make strange).

Expectations can be violated either by utilizing a marked element or by the spectator recognizing that an element is not used (is absent). A viewer familiar with the entire history of cinema will find both marked and unmarked elements meaningful, as the elements will be seen as binary oppositions. On the other hand, if the viewer is new to film language, only marked elements will be meaningful, since meaning only comes through violation of an expectation.

In saying that film semantics is dependent on a system of differences, Lotman is applying the Saussurian concept of oppositions to a form of communication which is antithetical to verbal communication. Bill Nichols (1975) has already shown that Saussure's notion of oppositions is problematic when applied to analogic forms of communication. While the majority of Saussure's concepts, e.g., the paradigmatic versus the syntagmatic and the diachronic versus the synchronic, are applicable to film communication, the notion of oppositions applies only to discrete forms of communication.

By attempting to apply Saussure's theory of oppositions to film, Lotman is forced to relate film semantics only to marked and unmarked elements, a very small aspect of film communication. If Lotman were only saying that a stationary shot (unmarked element) would not *stand out* to viewers unfamiliar with film history, I might agree. But one would not want to say that unmarked shots are "not meaningful," and this is what Lotman is led to argue. According to Lotman's own system, the first type of meaning is achieved by virtue of the relationship between the image and the object it depicts. Would not this type of meaning also contribute to the aesthetics of the film?

In answer to this line of inquiry, I suspect that Lotman would counter that this type of meaning does come into play, but is not cinematic. This takes us back to Eisenstein and the notion that a film must utilize montage (that which is specific to the art form) in order to be cinematography (1949:28). For Eisenstein, montage enables cinema to set up a system of similarities and differences which in turn makes film poetic. As Shukman pointed out, Lotman has adopted much from the Formalist doctrine of differences; "nothing can have specificity except when contrasted with, or opposed to, something else: the sign has meaning against its background, culture is defined in opposition to non-culture..." (Shukman 1977:5).

Clearly, the aesthetic premise behind Lotman's study of cinema is tied to this principle. While the notion of similarities and, especially, differences has had adequate success in the semiotics of literature and poetry, it runs into considerable trouble when applied to analogic forms of communication.

While these are not all the ideas on which Lotman expounds in *Semiotics of the Cinema*, they are the ones which form the basis for his theory. Basically, Lotman's intention is to build a theory of film language. This is considerably different from the goals of Metz and especially Worth, who attempted to examine film as a linguist would examine a new language. Lotman constantly refers to film as a language, but the term is only used metaphorically. Unlike Worth or Metz, Lotman is attempting to explain film aesthetics and film semantics simultaneously, but one must distinguish rigorously between the two concepts. Though Lotman hopes to explain how film movements, film actors, and film plots achieve aesthetic meaning, it becomes obvious from the results that an understanding of film *semantics* must precede an understanding of film *aesthetics*.

A basic difficulty with Lotman's approach is that the cognitive, perceptual, and emotive aspects of the film communication process must be integrated into any theory of film language. Had Lotman applied his knowledge of information theory, subtextual systems, and intertextual analysis to his study of cinema, he might have offered a model which would have incorporated the cognitive/perceptual/emotional process. Indeed, were it not for *The Structure of the Artistic Text* there would be no reason to believe that Lotman might be able to develop a heuristic model of the film communication process. Lotman and others in the U.S.S.R., however, have led a semiotic movement which has made considerable progress by utilizing aspects of cybernetics and information theory for the purpose of textual analysis. Though Lotman has not contributed significantly to visual communication in *Semiotics of the Cinema*, there is clearly reason to believe that further semiotic studies from Eastern Europe are worth examining.

Notes

- 1 For original essays in English see Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Michigan Slavic Contributions No. 9, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978).
- 2 The Moscow-Tartu semiotic group had its beginning in the summer of 1964 when a group of scholars met in Estonia to work on the problem of secondary modeling systems.
- 3 For an excellent study of Lotman's semiotic theories and an extensive bibliography see Shukman (1977).
- 4 For a more detailed examination of Eisenstein's application of Formalistic theories see Jerry L. Salvaggio (1980) and "Between Formalism and Semiotics: Eisenstein's Film Language," *Dispositio* 4(11-12):289-297.

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In The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), Elizabeth Sussex writes: "Probably nothing that might be described as a movement in the arts has produced less major art than the British documentary movement." And in this valuable composite history, based on interviews with principal figures of that movement, including Grierson, she provides evidence from Grierson's talented protégés and colleagues that the reason for this "rise and fall" of British documentary was simply John Grierson himself. Of all the pioneers in cinema history, John Grierson is the one most likely to cause problems for the biographer, historian, and critic. He taught us to use the motion picture camera to record the world honestly—all visual communication is in his debt—and yet he imposed such a didactic overlay on his films that he frequently deprived them of the honesty on which he insisted.

John Grierson was the father of the documentary film as we know it in the English-speaking world, and when he was active in England, between 1928 and 1939, as head of the film units of the Empire Marketing Board and later the General Post Office, the movement did indeed rise and flourish. When he left in 1939 to pursue other callings, it faltered and fell. Grierson was a man with the right idea, at the right time, in the right place, a man of intellect, industry, and influence. Under his stewardship the British documentary filmmakers produced about 300 films, and even if Elizabeth Sussex is correct in asserting that this is not major art, we must remember that the outstanding films from this vast output are milestones in the history of nonfiction film. Grierson's ideas have influenced virtually every nonfiction filmmaker, but he is not responsible for those films that make the documentary film synonymous with dullness. That is the fault only of those filmmakers who lack the imagination to make what he called a "creative treatment of actuality."

Ordinarily, John Grierson's writing is not pithy, so this definition of the documentary film is all the more incisive for its brief and balanced emphasis on imagination and reality. He believed that film had the power to clarify, synthesize, simplify, popularize, and even to evangelize. He saw it as an extension of the educational process, but not as an art. And that limited view, it seems to me, is where he made the crucial error that, more than any other, led to the decline of the movement he founded.

The basic force behind the documentary film was