A Contribution of Linguistics to Film Study: Metz's Large Syntagmatic

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For the sake of convenience, critics and students of the cinema often divide narrative films into large units or sequences. Thus, one speaks of the opening sequence, the murder sequence, the sequence in the train, etc. This manner of division makes for quick reference to specific parts of a film. Yet, it lacks the precision required for scientific studies. The division of a film into sequences is arrived at arbitrarily and gives no indication as to the way in which the various parts of the film under study are put together. In a word, a sequence can be any sort of film segment. But are there not various types of film segments?

Christian Metz, a French semiologist, has studied this question especially between 1966 and 1971. Applying to film study the linguistic methodology, C. Metz has progressively identified eight types of sequences or syntagmas which he called collectively "the large syntagmatic category of the image track." But the writings of Metz, like those of Bazin before him, reach the English readers at a time when they have already lost much of their interest among French readers. Metz has the merit of having competently explored new aspects of film language and thus of having helped film studies to proceed ahead. But the limitations of his researches now appear clearly. They deal almost exclusively with the narrative film, and in the case of the large syntagmatic, they purposely ignore the elements of sound and speech. This means that Metz's studies are concerned primarily with films prior to 1929 — as Metz himself candidly recognized. Moreover, conventional forms of narration, on the one hand, and the hegemony of image over sound, on the other hand, are two elements which the so called 'new cinema' the world over has rejected systematically since the end of the nineteen sixties. Today, there perhaps remain only three types of cinemas, namely, the decaying Hollywood cinema for mass consumption, the obsolete Bergman and Fellini cinema for limited consumption, and a new cinema which Louis Marcorelles (1) has proposed to call 'cinema direct'. On more than one ground, therefore, it would seem that Metz's research has little relevance except for the cinemas of the past. But that is not the case. For the methodology and the philosophy which have prompted Metz's work are — in spite of their limitations — more relevant today than ever. They inspire all efforts at demystifying film language and at creating tools whereby that language can be studied accurately. This subversive endeavour is on the line, precisely, of the new cinema itself.

However, this present article does not propose an exhaustive assessment of Metz's contribution (2). It is limited to his study of sequences in narrative films.

In *Film Language*, Metz has given a "General Table of the Large Syntagmatic Category of the Image Track" in which he has listed eight types of

sequences. Metz himself has re-worked that table several times and I have taken the liberty to also re-work it a little. Metz calls syntagmas those segments of films which are usually called sequences and which have a degree of autonomy within a film as they constitute definite parts of the story. Some of the syntagmas are a-chronological, others are chronological, according to whether or not they imply a reference to time. The a-chronological syntagmas are of two sorts: the *parallel syntagmas*—1—, when a few shorts are put in parallel to establish a comparison, viz. the house of a rich boy and that of a poor boy, and the *bracket syntagmas*—2—, when a number of shots which are not necessarily connected from the points of view of place and time, suggest an idea, like images of bombs thrown from an aircraft suggest the idea of war. The chronological syntagmas are by far the most numerous in the ordinary narrative film. They can be *descriptive syntagmas*—3— or narrative ones. For, a narration often includes descriptions which seem to suspend the course of its story but are nonetheless necessary to it. For instance shots which establish the place where an event happens belong to the narrative's time although they seem to interrupt it momentarily. Another sort of descriptive syntagma is the sequence in the potential mode—4— although there are relatively few examples of such a sequences (3). In a story it may happen that various courses of action are open to a protagonist. The film maker may show these various courses of action, leaving it to the spectator to fancy—should he care to—what course the protagonist actually took. The narrative syntagmas are linear or alternate. The *alternate syntagmas*—5—show chronologically and alternately the unfolding of two or more actions. The linear syntagmas are firstly those in which the time of the action and the time of the film coincide: these are *the scenes*—6—. When the time of the film and that of the action do not coincide, then, one has a sequence. Sequences are of two types: *the episodic* sequences—7— is made up of shots showing parts of a total process which are too short to be autonomous. For instance, in *Citizen Kane*, the "breakfast sequence" which shows Kane becoming progressively estranged from his wife is an episodic sequence. Finally, the *ordinary sequences*—8— are autonomous narrative segments which do not include the small and incomplete scenes characterizing the episodic sequences. In an ordinary sequence the time of the film is either longer or shorter than that of the story. The eight large syntagmas or autonomous segments of a narrative film can be tabulated thus:
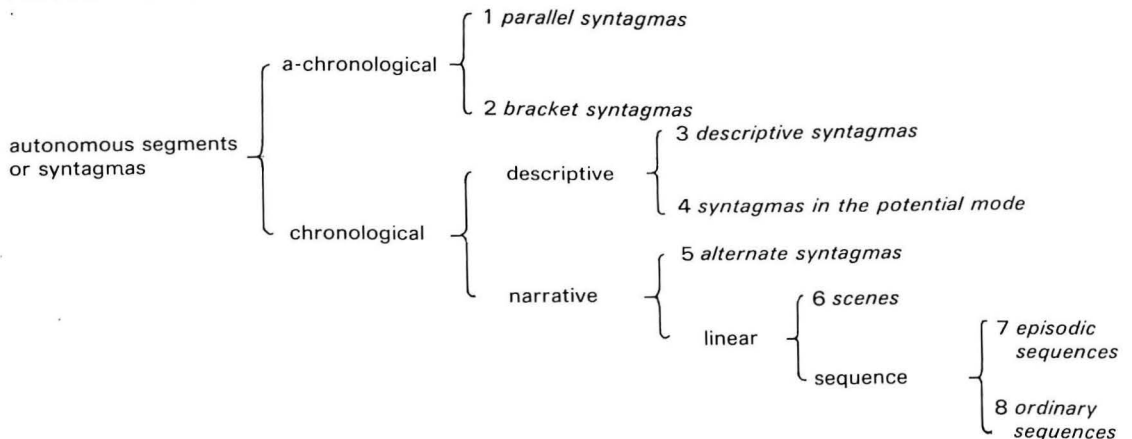
Metz has treated as large syntagmas the autonomous shots with their subdivision into sequence-shots (or one-shot scenes) and inserts. But these have not been included in the present table. For, in most instances, even simple shot contains several virtual shots. In other words, very often what was taken in one shot could have been taken in several shots and vice versa. Much depends on the acting ability of the protagonists and the technical equipment available. Besides, in the finished film a shot is defined as a part of that film which has been photographed in one camera operation (without interruption), and, after necessary trimming, has been fastened at either ends to other parts of the film. A shot is easily identified as a continuous series of images very similar when compared one to the next. As such a shot is a cine-photographic unit, not an element of film language. And, thus, the autonomous shot does not belong to this level of analysis.

The approach to film study we have thus far described can arouse reticence in persons otherwise enthusiastic about "film appreciation". Metz was used to that type of reticence. He knew that some people, opposed as they are to "any formal approach, to any breaking down of a film into parts, argue that film is too rich in signification to be divided in that way and thus they confine themselves to the empiricism and impressionism that have too long marred the writings on the cinema" (*Langage et cinéma* p. 154; translation mine). Why should one object to a systematic study of a film? Is it to protect "the mystery of art and being?" What, then, threatens that mystery? Will analysis do away with it? Or, rather, will not analysis circumscribe that mystery and define it? Seeking to understand how one understands is not a threat to the object under study nor to understanding itself. In fact, what is threatened by a rigorous analysis, what one wants to protect, what might *appear* rather than vanish is the "cinema" prevalent in bourgeois society, the cinema-ideology at once image of the world and world of images.

There are other reasons why one may resent the use of the linguistic approach in film study. Firstly, semiotic studies of films are yet very rare and most of them are difficult to read if one is not familiar with linguistic theories. Metz, in particular, is not easy to read even in French. A second difficulty encountered by some students of the cinema in respect to linguistics is more general. It pertains to the tension one can observe in the field of literary studies between the scholars who use an approach inspired by linguistics and the scholars who, so to say, "keep to literature". It is as if the former were interested in analysis and the latter in synthesis. In fact, the two approaches ought to be complementary. Today, for instance, there is a tendency to study style, the most intangible aspect of literature, on the basis of an analysis of language, its most obvious aspect. The linguist is rightly suspicious of the intuitions of a critic which would escape empirical verifications. On the other hand, the critic perhaps fears that his intuition might turn to naught under scrutiny. In fact, far from being harmful, the linguistic approach can be most stimulating. For,

> "a rigorous checking, by means of a description of the total complex of features possessed by the text, of features intuitively judged to be stylistically significant, is likely to uncover other, previously unobserved,

significant features; or to demonstrate the interrelationship of a series of features in such a way as to offer new, or at least modified, responses to the text as a whole. In this way, our responses to the style of a text are open to progressive development". (4)

The authors of the foregoing lines have also this to say which is most relevant to film studies:

"A detailed analysis of linguistic features within the text has one of its aims to cut beneath the generalizations, to get behind the meta-phorical labels, of which the literary study of style makes such use (. . . In using those terms, critics) tend to conflate statements about language with statements about the effects produced by language (. . .) A detailed examination of stylistic effects, as opposed to metaphorical labelling, will inevitably lead us to ask the question: 'If it is said (or if we feel) that this particular style is 'grand' or 'plain, or 'sinewy', in what particular respect does the language provide evidence of grandeur, plain-ness or sinewy-ness? Are there linguistic correlates to the responses we experience and so label?" (5)

A *still from* The World of Apu

Bearing in mind that Metz's large syntagmatic pertains only to the image track of the narrative film, we can now attempt to utilize some of its concepts in order to analyse a few sound films and see if we can uncover in these films correlates to the responses we experience while watching them. The films I have chosen are Satyajit Ray's *The World of Apu* (WA), *Charulata* (CH) and *Days and Nights in the Forest* (DN). One can easily perceive a stylistic evolution from the first of these three films (1959) to the third (1970). The narration in DN is much freer than that in WA. One has the

definite impression that the latter film is tighter and less "slow". This impression rests on the specific way in which these films are made. For instance, the number of shots is obviously greater in DN than in WA and this can be perceived at a first screening of these films. A study of the film shot by shot on the moviola reveals that, in fact, the number of shots in WA is only 435, while it is almost double, namely 858, in DN. (6) On the other hand, the number of large syntagmas is much greater in WA than in DN. Even though the identification of the large syntagmas might vary to an extent from one student to the other, since in the present case the same method has been applied by the same person, it is significant that the number of syntagmas in WA be 34 and only 20 in DN. Thus, in these two films the number of shots and the number of large syntagmas are inversely proportional. As for CH, in almost every respect, this film stands between WA and DN. The various points mentioned so far can be summarized thus:

		WA	CH	DN
1.	date of the film	1959	1964	1969
2.	screen time in minutes	117	112	115
3.	film time (time of the story)	5 years	5 months	3 days
4.	number of shots	435	500	858
5.	number of large syntagmas	34	24	20

The numbers of syntagma mentioned above do not include the inserts. However, while there are very few inserts in WA, there are many of them in DN. The diminution of large syntagmas in DN is predictable given the short duration of the story time. But on the other hand, the increase in the number of shots is the more significant from the point of view of style. It is largely because there are a greater number of shots that one feels the style is freer, swifter and, as such, more exciting in DN than in WA. In DN the unity of space and time does not need to be preserved, as in WA, within the shot itself. It transcends the succession of shots. Again, the interpersonal relationships are not represented in space by complex camera movements as in CH. In DN, these relationships are established by straight cuts from one person to the other, from one point of view to another. Nor can one observe in DN these shots lasting for a long time as in WA. On the other hand, the story time and the film time coincide in DN for quite a few moments on several occasions. Then, the intensity of the emotion replaces the rapid succession of shots. One notices also a great diminution in the number of mixes (or dissolves). There are but few of these in DN while there are some fifteen in CH and as many as forty in WA. Again, the stereotyped sequence opener of WA, namely, a c.u. widening into a middle or long shot, is almost absent from DN.

What these differences between WA and DN point to and what one feels while watching these films, is a greater freedom in the use of the film medium, as if Ray had broken the spell the image seems to have had on him

A *still from* Charulata

in his early films. In DN Ray is totally the master of the image he creates. Perhaps one could compare WA to a painting and DN to music. Again, one might argue that WA is somewhat like traditional, conventional, theatre while DN is more similar to a novel. For, there can be observed at least three main theatrical conventions at work in WA. The syntagmas are mainly scenes (where story and film time coincide) and the discontinuities in time are either short gaps or they are bridged by a dissolve, so that the fluidity of the film is created almost graphically from image to image. In DN, on the other hand, the continuity does not rest so much on the graphic linkage of shot to shot, but on their dialectical relationships. Secondly, the camera in WA always precedes the protagonists wherever they go. In other words, the beginning of many a shot discloses a place—in the manner a curtain opens in front of theatre spectators—and the film's spectators see most of the film from in front, as if they were seated in a theatre. Thirdly, the frame of the screen is used like the three walls of a stage: the protagonists enter and exit as they would on the stage. On the other hand, DN is almost totally devoid of these theatrical conventions.

In a word, whatever the qualities—mainly beauty, strength and truth in the depiction of emotions—of WA, DN is much better cinematically than WA. The foregoing discussion has provided sufficient correlates to this response to the films, a response which was expressed with great perceptivity by Penelope Houston in her review of DN:

"In terms of subject, *Days and Nights in the Forest* risks being classified as small-scale Ray. In fact, one would rate this lucid, ironic and super-

latively graceful film among the very best of his work; not least for the evidence of how much a director actually learns about his craft. It's no insult to the Apu Trilogy to say that the Ray of those days lacked the sheer confidence, the ability to turn around and manoeuvre within a film and a scene, that enables him to achieve the exact pitch and balance of *Days and Nights*". (6)

Thanks to the contribution of linguistics to film study it has become possible, as the example above shows, to uncover with a degree of accuracy those elements in a film which cause a critic and even a simple cinemagoer to give a film a specific response. Film language, like any other language and even when it is used by a master, can be submitted to rigorous scrutiny. As a result of such a scrutiny, a better understanding of a film's quality is gained and in the same extent the appreciation for the maker of the film confirmed and increased.

A *still from* Days and Nights in the Forest

References

1. Marcorelles, Louis: *Eléments pour un nouveau cinéma.* Unesco, Paris, 1970, p. 154.
2. Metz, Christian: *Essais sur la signification au cinéma.* Ed. Klincksieck, 1971, p. 246.
   Langage et cinéma. Ed. Larousse, 1971, p. 223.
   Film Language. A Semiotics of the Cinema. Oxford University Press, 1974, xiv, p. 268, being a translation of *Essais.*
3. In *Pierrot le fou* (Godard), the protagonists are attacked in their flat. Three or four ways of escaping are possible. The protagonists are shown using in turn each of these ways. Finally, they are seen after their escape. In *Trans-Europ-Express* (Robbe-Grillet) a smuggler is seen getting rid of the same parcel in three different manners.
4. "An approach to the study of style" by John Spencer and Michael Gregory. In *Linguistics and Style,* volume edited by John Spencer. Oxford University Press, 1964, xii, p. 109. See p. 85.
5. Id. pp. 91-92.
6. Monthly Film Bulletin, Dec. 1971, pp. 235-236.