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**CONCERNING THE CINEMATIC METAPHOR
CONTROVERSY**

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The title of this paper already presupposes that we have as good as settled for a more general idea that film is essentially a linguistic phenomenon, which would also mean that such a thing as cinematic metaphor indeed exists. However, as we know, the dispute as to whether film has a linguistic or similar nature continues, and there is anything but solid agreement as to what to make of the art in question. This also concerns the metaphor. We can easily point at visual or audio-visual structures resembling poetic metaphors, we can even interpret them correctly, but the general design of such metaphors remains elusive. There is even much controversy whether they are rightly called cinematic metaphors, with some calling for an entirely different approach.

Many theorists before me have tacitly assumed that some sort of audio-visual language in fact exists. With their backs so secured, they could go into details or embark on empirical studies while postponing essential questions which, they believed, film theory was not yet ready to face.

With that in mind, I would like to focus here on specific cinematic syntagmatic units commonly referred to as metaphors. Film theory has long treated them as visual representations of verbal metaphors, although it seems such expressions are quite rare and appear predominantly in silent movies. Such a metaphor stands out, striking the viewer with its stark otherness, forcing interpretation in a way different from the usual shot-by-shot reading. There are two reasons for metaphors being such a rarity. First, even when theorists decide to apply rhetoric vocabulary to cinematic experience, they

conclude that directors mainly use synecdoche and metonymy. Metaphor is not a film-specific formula and, if at all, rarely occurs in the movies. Jean Mitry insists that there is no such thing as cinematic metaphor, claiming that its classic examples provided by other theorists are nothing else but metonymies (Mitry 1997). Second, if we want to find a metaphor in cinematic texts, but at the same time eschew the effort to build a general theory of visual metaphor, we are forced to conclude that such expressions must be either extremely simple, primitive even, or remain a conundrum, utterly and completely unintelligible to the viewer, regardless how film-conscious, in theory or technique, they might be.

This narrow understanding of cinematic metaphor was suggested by Russian formalists who were inspired by the silent, primarily Soviet, cinema, as well as some early metaphors occurring in French and American films. It was later substantially widened, but also blurred, to the extent that it ultimately became imprecise, vague, and unfit for analytic purposes. Contemporary film theory has refined and fine-tuned its discussion on metaphor, but failed to come up with tools for clear distinction of metaphors present in contemporary cinematic texts. For this reason, theorists still prefer to discuss metaphor along the lines proposed by Eisenstein. The current broad understanding of metaphor is indebted to Jakobson who conceived metaphor and metonymy as basic rhetoric models of film (Jakobson 1981). His findings were further explored in contemporary semiotic thought, particularly by Christian Metz who advanced Jakobson's analysis by differentiating metaphors and metonymies within syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures (Metz 1986).¹

Metaphors in a narrow sense of the term, originating in silent cinema, were analysed on a number of occasions, mostly to illustrate notions broader than metaphor itself. Being simple and primitive, and thus easier to dissect and classify, metaphors could be used to develop a basic prototype for the category spacious enough to accommodate expressions other than themselves. With the advent of silent movie metaphors, the emerging language of cinema was beginning to take new shape, departing from the forms established in the first twenty years of the medium. In a wider sense, this process heralded a new poetic language pursued in the movies. Film theory recurrently envisaged cinema as prose or poetry, either conceptually rooted in literary tradition, or developing prose or poetry of an entirely new variety. Mostly, however, theorists followed classical rhetoric conception of metaphor as a

¹For historical research on metaphor and latest developments in film theory, see Godzic 1978 and 1980.

trope or figure of speech, finding elsewhere — not so much in the hypothetical cinematic language, but in specific works — other rhetoric tropes, such as synecdoche, litotes, hyperbole, etc.

It comes as no surprise that this understanding of cinematic metaphor corresponds with linguistic and literary theories that stress its deviatory character, a disruption in an otherwise correct language. Cohen argues that all figures of speech, not least the metaphor, operate on two planes in a two-pronged procedure: they disrupt the norm, destroying the coherence of an expression on the syntagmatic plane, followed by its restoration on the semantic plane through reconstruction of figural sense derived from the meaning proper (Cohen 1982). Todorov refuses to place these deviatory expressions against the "zero level" of literal speech, interpreting them rather as a result of the violation of linguistic rules (Todorov 1967).

Teresa Dobrzyńska suggests that

"contemporary arguments embracing the rhetoric thinking in envisaging metaphor as a deviation strongly emphasise the incoherence of metaphorical expression, incompatibility of the elements involved (...) Theoretical implication of this stance would mean that metaphor is a syntactic problem (...) Metaphor is understood here as an infringement of rules governing meaningful connection of words, therefore it must be viewed as a violation of grammar" (Dobrzyńska 1980: 150).

It would seem that such a deviant conception of metaphor complicates things further, as it introduces some highly confusing concepts like linguistic norm, syntax, or grammar. We can easily demonstrate, however, that filmmakers — who do not think in verbal language, nor care for descriptive tools — indeed used metaphors to disrupt the existing norms and break free from overfamiliar measures to succeed in sharing meanings or unsettle the rules of storytelling. It is a wholly different matter whether these ventures legitimize comparisons with linguistic metaphors occurring in verbal language. That said, first cinematic metaphors, along with theoretical descriptive attempts, were clearly inspired by the rhetoric model. We will now try to understand what was, could, should, or perhaps in any case could not be the result of those endeavours.

To provide substance for our considerations, we shall start with an example borrowed from "The Kid," Chaplin's movie from 1921. In the opening sequence, introducing the background of the story, the viewer learns that a painter leaves his model and a lover, never to think of her again. The girl, now alone, penniless, and with no shoulder to cry on, decides to give

birth to the bastard child. Confused and clueless as to her future, she leaves the hospital. Between two takes depicting the women carrying the child there is a third one, showing Christ carrying his cross up the Golgotha.

The question here is why, and under what circumstances, is one able to read correctly the design of the director, who, to justify the girl's decision to abandon her child in the car, wants the viewer to consider the plight awaiting the unwed mother. First, however, we must consider the peculiar nature of the shot, which seems to violate the rules of cinematic storytelling.

Now, the basic rule informing the understanding of the viewer is that the diegesis holds the images together. The world presented in the feature film forms a spatiotemporal framework inhabited by the characters. A sequence of images lending the background to the story may actually be incoherent (specific takes may be taken in various spatiotemporal setups), but the illusion of coherence must be secured. Although the world on the screen must not necessarily be like ours, it must be arranged according to explicitly or implicitly clear rules.

The takes narrating the fate of the girl are interrupted with imagery foreign to the spatiotemporal setting of the story. It even seems that the director wants us to treat the Christ scene as foreign to the narrative proper. It is impossible to interpret it as a statue, on which the heroin might have laid her eyes, or as a recalled painting possibly seen somewhere else. The transition is sudden and unexpected, the image of Christ violently disrupting the initial coherence of the scene depicting the girl leaving the hospital. The viewer is forced to wonder about the origins of the image. Considering that silent cinematography of the day frequently used montage cuts to mark transition to another spatiotemporal framework, parallel plots, etc., Chaplin had to come up with something unconventional. It had to be blunt and strong enough to make it clear that the image on the screen is out of place, devoid of narrative function or familiar means of articulation. In my view, the non-diegetic nature of the intruding image serves as a platform for pragmatic instruction, described by Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska in the following way:

"Each metaphorical expression contains in its modal frame an implied pragmatic instruction that always interacts with other elements within the frame. I imagine it goes something like that: this unusual (metaphorical) manner of speaking is not unintended — I want you to discover what I mean by it." (Okopień-Sławińska 1980: 26)

Perhaps the sole fact that the image is of a non-diegetic nature is enough to deliver the message, but it is additionally reinforced by almost snapshot-

like exposure, resembling a flash of illumination, as well as a montage cut, which is even more unusual here, as Chaplin rarely resorts to such measures to charge the scene with expressivity. Montage cuts traditionally take the viewer to another spatiotemporal setup within the diegetic framework, but in this particular scene it serves to take the image out of it. The image of Christ struggling up Golgotha has neither spatiotemporal nor cause-effect connection with the shots depicting the women.

If this non-diegetic image of Christ was to be examined on its own, it would fit the definition of symbol offered by Mieczysław Wallis in his phrase "symbolic sign" (in which the symbol is represented by an iconic sign, Wallis 1977). In itself, the shot is nothing but the familiar Christian symbol. Its singularity is only exposed when injected between two syntactically consistent frames. The whole expression becomes now a simile: an abandoned and unwed mother will suffer like Christ carrying his cross up the slope of Golgotha. Popular definitions of metaphor define it as a shortened simile, therefore it would be perhaps a misuse to call this particular expression a metaphor. Note, however, that it was only recently that film theory (Metz 1986) begun discerning between metaphor and simile, with the former traditionally denoting both single-element utterances resembling the actual metaphor and more complex similes.

My comments are not limited to expressions that fit literary conception of metaphor, since these multi-element (mostly three-shot) structures have qualities typical to certain cinematic structures. Prior to any discussions on how to name the phenomenon in question I would first like to focus on its description.

Similarly to Chaplin's example, one can characterise famous harps and balalaikas in Eisenstein's "October." Sessions of the Congress of Soviets (speeches of the opposition, to be more precise) were intercut with close-ups of hands touching the strings of harps and balalaikas. Distortion of diegesis is here even stronger, as non-diegetic shots consist of close-ups that resist spatial identification, contrary to Chaplin's film where the long shot creates an entirely "different space." Eisenstein upped the ante. The shot strikes the viewer as an obvious mistake, a dissonance, nonsense even. This must prompt the question: musical instruments in the deliberative hall? Who is playing, and why? It just doesn't click with the diegetic setup. But since Eisenstein opted for a close-up lacking any spatiotemporal reference, thus violating the plot linearity and derailing spatiotemporal coherence, extraction of this shot from its diegetic framework is more difficult than in the Chaplin example, ultimately delivering a more powerful and jarring violation of the

editing rules. Pragmatic instruction for this non-diegetic shot is additionally enhanced by a mixture of a montage cut, field size, and shot duration.

Eisenstein also uses non-diegetic elements inside the otherwise diegetic shots. This is the case with one scene from "Old and new:" old women are shown in a chimneyless hut, excruciatingly hard work and squalor having erased from their faces both gender and age. In the interior there is also a portrait of the Mona Lisa, a symbol of enigmatic femininity. There is nothing in the diegetic setup that would render plausible the presence of the Mona Lisa, original or copy, in the hut. As such, it is a hint left by the author, containing pragmatic instruction to focus not on possible interpretations of poverty-stricken rural Russia, but on the plight of women, who, with their men killed in the war, are left to starve and work their fingers to the bone, not even remotely resembling beings destined to be loved.

Relation, described above as syntagmatic, is here realised through the arrangement of objects within the shot. A non-diegetic symbol (Mona Lisa) is juxtaposed with objects and figures belonging to the presented world.

Talkies expanded this structure vertically, infusing the visual imagery with non-diegetic verbal or musical elements. The non-diegetic status of music is hardly new, since it emerges from the common practice of illustrating the screening with a fairly random score, with only vague reference to the visual imagery. The same goes for verbal expression. Take the voiceover, for example, which is sometimes used as the standard solution, as in a documentary or newsreel. In such a case, i.e. when the non-diegetic effect lacks the desired disrupting force, the effect must be achieved through intensified alienation, distortion, or other means singular enough to unsettle the diegesis. Film theory never applies the notion of metaphor to vertical structures,² instead terming it, somewhat deceptively, "counterpoint." It seems, however, that it wouldn't be that difficult to discover that the counterpoint implements similar patterns to those typically applied in the image language.

Let's consider Fritz Lang's "Hangmen also die!," with the score of Hans Eisler. Heydrich lies on his deathbed in the hospital, the rhythm of the music is set by the dripping blood administered for transfusion. The underlying idea was to strip the moment of pathos and drama invariably

²This approach was first proposed in a master's thesis' written at the University of Silesia by Halina Kręć — *Analiza metafor filmowych w utworach Andrzeja Wajdy* ("Analysis of cinematic metaphors in the films of Andrzej Wajda") and Grzegorz Kieć — *Próba metafory filmowej* ("An attempt at the theory of cinematic metaphor"). Both papers are held in the Archive of the Institute for Polish Literature and Culture, University of Silesia.

associated with death. Hence the music, not only non-diegetic, but also wholly incompatible with the developments on the screen. The musical phrase is elegant to the point of being over-the-top, with dissonances in higher registers. Pragmatic instruction seeks to divert the viewer's attention from the death itself, urging us to focus on who in fact dies: not a hero, but a scoundrel.

Even more estranging is the score written by Dmitri Shostakovich for Yutkevich's "Golden Mountains," where the factory sequence is accompanied by a magnificent waltz.

As we can see, expression structured in a sequence of shots may as well be contained in one shot, or even emerge through interplay between the image and sound. This can happen if the essence of the structure is secured, this being the non-diegetic nature of the symbolic element falling out from the context. Christ struggling up Golgotha does not belong to the represented reality of the contemporary American city, musical instruments do not appear in the deliberative hall, the Mona Lisa's portrait will never hang in the hut of a pauper, a waltz cannot be played in a factory. Therefore, their presence must have a specific motive, as yet unexplored by the public in the twenties. Metaphoric elements signify and evoke something else from what they actually represent. Arrangement of shots, internal composition of elements within one shot, or juxtaposition of image and sound all serve the purpose of building a concept that has no imaginary equivalent.

This conclusion directly leads to the well-known argument made by Eikhenbaum who insisted on close links between "cine-metaphor" and verbal metaphor:

"The cine-metaphor is feasible only on the condition that it is supported by a verbal metaphor. The spectator can only understand it in circumstances where there is a corresponding metaphorical expression in his stock of language [...] The cine-metaphor is a sort of visual realisation of a verbal metaphor. It is natural that only current verbal metaphors can serve as material for cine-metaphors — the spectator quickly grasps them just because they are familiar to him and are therefore easily guessed at as being metaphors. Thus, for example, the word 'fall' is used in language metaphorically to mean a road to ruin; hence the metaphor proved feasible in *The Big Wheel*: in the inn where the sailor Shorin finds himself a billiard table is shown — and the billiard falls into the pocket. The totally episodic nature of this scene makes the spectator understand that its sense is not part of the story, but part of the commentary: it is the start of the 'fall' of the hero." (Eikhenbaum 1982: 30)

At the time he wrote the essay in 1926, Eikhenbaum was quite sure that, given the abundance of expressive measures, like different angles, lighting, etc., film metaphor had a bright future ahead of it, and envisaged it as an autonomous cinematic device in the making.

Looking back on his linguistic experiments in the silent cinema, Eisenstein judged structures used in "October" as naïve and coarse. That said, he still considered them metaphors, at one point noting only their primitivism, a necessary feature given their pioneering role in a development of cinematic language. Much like Eikhenbaum, he explores relations between visual and cinematic metaphors, and although he generally seems to be more insightful in his inquiries, they nevertheless shared certain ideas. For instance, commenting on "Battleship Potemkin," Eisenstein describes a metaphor which he designed in a purely verbal fashion: "In Potemkin three separate close-ups of three different marble lions in different attitudes were merged into one roaring lion and, moreover, in another film-dimension — an embodiment of a metaphor: 'The very stones roar!'" (Eisenstein 1949: 253).

Let's revisit the examples above. Are each of them a visualization of specific verbal metaphor, simple enough to be verbalised by the viewer?

The sequence from "The Kid" visualizes Golgotha to evoke a metaphor of trial and tribulation, but it would be equally acceptable to say that it lends visual expression to the phrase "bear one's cross," taken to be a metaphor of a terrible plight. Instrumental metaphors are explained in the script to "October:" "the orators of the petty-bourgeois party poured forth like balalaikas" (Eisenstein 1974: 51). Authors of "Hangmen also die!" also remarked that the scene was composed with the phrase *auf den letzten Loch pfeifen* in mind.

But if the metaphor is not embedded in the everyday language of the given culture (in the Chaplin example), or the authors themselves do not give us a clue, is it legitimate to argue that there are intersubjective grounds for such direct reading of specific structures, as encouraged by "the very stones roar!?" Let us dwell on this example for a while.

Galvano Della Volpe uses the lion scene in "Battleship Potemkin" to expose the inadequacy occurring between verbal description and imagery. He describes the feeling

"of being at loss of words that must appear banal ('lion—revolutionary,' etc.) when one is confronted with these three brilliant shots of the stone lion (sleeping, awoken, roaring), unmatched (visual) expressivity of which must remain a mystery that cannot be exhibited in words" (Della Volpe 1968).

Nothing along the lines of "the very stones roar" but rather "lion-revolutionary," with a hint of other possibilities for verbal interpretation of the scene.

Let's return to Eisenstein's comments. Instrumental metaphors are explained as follows: "Harps (...) were shown as an imagist symbol of the mellifluent speech of Menshevik opportunism at the Congress. The balalaikas were not shown as balalaikas, but as an image of the tiresome strumming of these empty speeches in the face of the gathering storm of historical events" (Eisenstein 1949: 245).

As we can see, orators may as much "pour forth" as there is "tiresome strumming of empty speeches" — we can thus imagine that visual metaphor is not entirely discharged in a single verbal expression; one could easily invent a couple more, or even list all the possible readings, and still be left with the impression that one cannot grasp the meaning entirely.

There is obviously no direct cross-translatability of image and words, as much is conceded even by authors arguing that visual metaphors must be sourced from verbal metaphors.

Linguistic studies and the rhetoric prowess of Eisenstein may have led some commentators to suspect that his cinematic structures were often based on creative techniques pursued in Antiquity — using word as a primary substance further moulded into the imagery — but one may assume that usually it was the other way round. Glimpses into the creative processes, including those of cinema, invite the conclusion that artists think about the material of their craft. As a concept, syntagmatic relation between the three lions was probably invented prior to its verbal transcription.

Out of the three metaphors — Golgotha, instruments, and lions — the first two seem rather crude and superficial, whereas the third shines on its own. But in verbal translation they will not differ in structure or value. It would then be wrong to say that visual metaphor draws its vividness and force from verbal metaphor, after which it is said to be fashioned. By visual transformation it immediately takes off as a wholly independent being, now freed from its verbal fundamentals which only ignite the metaphorical process.

Conversely, we would tend to agree that each visual metaphor — shrewd or failed, banal or original — can only be translated into the worn out verbal metaphor, or at least this seems to be the case for expressions discussed in this paper. In this sense, visual metaphor is inextricably tied to its verbal counterpart.

Let's now try to reiterate the metaphorical process step by step,

acting on the Eikhenbaum's assumption that it's initiated by a verbal metaphor, which is visualised and re-verbalised by the spectator. Naturally, if it was not for the image's potential to transcend semantic field of the verbal metaphor, such theoretical considerations would be futile, resembling a play with images or a visual riddle. But this is not the case and even the simplest verbal metaphor, when visualized, produces an abundance of additional meanings, along with those not originally intended by the creator, meanings that Ronald Barthes called the third meaning of cinema (Barthes 1977). Even if the verbal metaphor supplies the primary substance, the visual medium causes an expansion of the semantic field. To reverse this process would mean ruining what has just been gained. Ambiguity introduced by visual language is not designed to narrow down possible meanings to the single optimal metaphoric expression; instead, it's is a sort of a hint, a vague suggestion of the idea informing the interpretive process that is not meant to reach some definite point. When asked for clarification what they meant or what they wanted to express, the regular answer of visual artists would be that if they could have put it into words, a picture or a movie would not come into being in the first place.

To understand the triple-lion syntagm, we do not necessarily need to be enlightened with "the very stones roar" or "lion-revolutionary," and in "The Kid" we do not have to discuss which meaning, "Golgotha" or "bear one's cross," is the more fitting one, although there are some conditions to be met for those images to be comprehensible.

Above, we have briefly touched on the idea that silent cinema metaphors violate linguistic rules, or, more precisely, rules of cinematic storytelling, and the very fact that distortion draws attention to the semantic side of the issue.

To this one can reply that psycho- and socio-anthropological research has established that even viewers with little cinematic experience are capable of identifying cinematic techniques, and if these have so far been unknown to them, it is not long before they grasp the idea. What is difficult and unfamiliar is not related to cinema itself (represented here by a peculiar syntax of moving pictures) - the real challenge is to grasp social and cultural phenomena foreign to the given culture. Anthropologists argue that African societies may not understand certain themes or ideas and not because they are inaccessibly structured, but that the system of values or motives driving the characters are unreadable (Morin 2005).

A prerequisite for understanding the three-lion syntagm is to live in a culture that developed connotations of the animal in question. An Inuit will

find it unintelligible, much like an African would be confused with allusions to multiple varieties of snow, each given a separate name in cultures of the North. The simple and primitive syntagm from "The Kid" is viewed as such only in the society that operates with Christian iconography, for all the others it is meaningless and passes unnoticed.

The expressions discussed here are deeply embedded in the linguistic and cultural tradition of Western societies. For that reason, use of those expressions and development of cinematic language along these lines has never raised questions regarding their universal accessibility and intelligibility. Maybe this just means that we have mastered imaginative language, read and speak it effortlessly, but the language itself remains a mystery to us.

We are left with one more problem of a terminological nature. Should we firmly stand by the term "metaphor," however objectionable and controversial it may be, or try to give it a more adequate name?

As we have seen, expressive measures discussed here can be at times safely called metaphors (as in "Potemkin," which, by the by, lacks non-diegetic components), while elsewhere "symbol" or "simile" seems to be more fitting (note, however, that all those figures were sometimes described as metonymies or synecdoches). This would mean that visual expressions, even though resembling rhetorical figures, are in essence distinct phenomena that should have their own classification based on their core structural qualities, rather than similarity to verbal expressions. Therefore, although sparking lively controversies (Henderson 1980), the method used by Metz to describe and classify narrative syntagmas in film seems in the end of the day more appealing, at least as a general idea or a guiding principle. That said, Metz's idea of grand syntagmatic completely ignores the problem that ultimately interests me most. Namely, what is the connection between the given structure and meaning to be discovered on the receiving end. Metz focuses on narrative, whereas my main interest would center around rules of cinematic syntax.

All the expressions discussed in this paper are similar in that they produce relations that emerge after the injection of a non-diegetic agent to the story. This distorts the narrative and signifies the specific manner of reading prescribed by the author, one that transcends the storyline and invites associations of a general nature. However, before the phenomenon can be given a proper name of its own, the theory of film syntax must be developed to the point of being able to incorporate this phenomenon into a wider theoretical framework, and to create comprehensive typology of expressions specific to cinema.

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