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ON THE INTERPLAY OF SOUND SUBCODES IN FILM

Intentionally or not , film semiotics is drawing from ideas already circulating in semiotic studies focusing on morphology or cinematic ontology. Some semiotic discussions accommodate these familiar themes to contribute new arguments or demonstrate what have so far been only intuited by the theory, still others fail to deliver valuable insights.

The latter happens when semiotic theory targets the problem of sound in film. The issue has never been in the primary focus of semiotic studies, coming to the spotlight only when it's impossible to ignore film as an audiovisual experience. For example, in *Clés and codes du cinema*, Iveline Baticle (Baticle 1973) goes on to distinguish a dozen image codes, but never does this with regard to sound codes. Semiotics is thus emulating film theory which prioritizes image over sound or leaves the latter entirely to other disciplines. Indeed, it was not film theorists but musicologists and composers who developed the theory of the film score.[1] Similarly, the verbal component in film was apparently left for the consideration of other fields: with film theory barely touching on the issue, recent studies on this subject are coming from linguists and philologists.[2]

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[1]The first study to explore this field was *Music for the Films* (Sabaneev 1978). For a standard work of reference, see Adorno and Eisler 2005. The most comprehensive theoretical account of film score was offered in Lissa 1964.

[2]This particular topic is explored in various Master's thesis' completed at the University of Warsaw, University of Silesia and Adam Mickiewicz University.

Film theory works under the assumption that cinema is primarily a visual art, with sound only duplicating either visual aesthetics or the inherent message and at best playing second fiddle to image. Believing that the cinematic message is built of iconic codes, semioticians very much share this assumption. Sound codes, although not exactly meaningless, are said to operate under some other frameworks that lend the key to their interpretation. Umberto Eco suggests that "sound and verbal messages, although deeply influencing denotation and connotation of iconic facts (and *vice versa*), have their own independent codes, analyzable under different frameworks" (Eco 1968).

And this is the standard practice followed in semiotic studies. When writing about a film score one discusses leitmotifs, minor or major keys, the Neoromantic style, and so forth, but this doesn't say anything of how the musical score functions within the structure of the film. All it does is name the code in question. Eco makes a similar remark when discussing film dialogue: "when a character speaks English, then what is said is (. . .) driven by a code called 'English"' (Eco 1968). In other words, should we wish to explore the topic further our only option is to study the code identified as "English." This, however, leaves us empty-handed.

As we can see, semiotics revived the idea of film as a layer-structured phenomenon. Note that "layers" in this particular context do not refer to the Ingardenian sense of the word, denoting rather its ordinary meaning to stress that film consists of various substances, such as image, music, word, and noise.[3] In a nutshell, the framework developed by film theorists and adopted by semioticians goes as follows: image is identified with the notion of "film," which is equivalent to "message." It is accompanied by the three remaining layers, each having an independent source: music accompanies the image as another artistic genre, noise is generated by the physical reality (irrespective of its frequent artificiality), whereas the word is regarded as the stuff of ordinary language, or a remainder of literary "prefabricate," the script.

Layers are vertically interconnected in a number of ways (many theories explore this area, but all ultimately rest on the same principle (Eisenstein 1991; Lissa 1964). This, however, cannot disguise the fact that a movie is perceived as a work of art consisting of separate bands, each differing in substance, aesthetics and communication.

In its beginnings, film theory was both preoccupied and shaped by

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[3]First proposed and developed by Boleslaw Lewicki (Lewicki 1964), this division is widely adopted in the literature.

the technological side of cinematic creation, perceived as a series of steps in a technological process. First came shooting, followed by recording of dialogues, music, and noise, with the production culminating in the merging of all components into a single work of art. With the invention of the synchronic camera, the process of cinematic production changed entirely as it enabled registering of all layers simultaneously. This revolution, clearly, must have had little impact on theory, if semioticians still prefer to explore film as a layered structure (Spottiswoode 1965; May 1947; Martin 1977; Lewicki 1959; Płażewski 1961).

Film is often conceived as a reflection of reality (again, in purely mechanistic-naturalistic terms,[4] without philosophical connotations). On this account, film is an audio-visual copy of physical reality, a reproduction, a cast, an imprint on photosensitive film, true-to-life recording of visuals and soundscapes of the surrounding world, something what Kracauer labelled "camera reality" (Kracauer 1960).

This idea directly inspired Barthes' perception of film as *analogon* (Barthes 1964; Delahaye and Rivette 1986; Pilard and Tardy 1964). The co-presence of image and sound is ruled by the analogy to life, itself a mixture of images and sounds. In film, the constant flow of imagery is accompanied by sound effects -this mixture doesn't have to be justified since sound naturally blends in with the environment.

Various film-theoretical concepts are often inspired by the fact that film is a product of various materials, inviting interpretations along the lines of the Wagnerian notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Müller and Liebeneiner 1952). In semiotic theory a similar approach was proposed by Christian Metz who suggested viewing film as a multi-code phenomenon (Metz 1974, his claim is shared by other semioticians, however different their vocabulary may be). Metz is never explicitly naming these codes, let alone outlining rules governing their interactions or implications that follow. Much like other authors, he describes these codes as parallel structures, each governed by its own set of rules, determined, one may imagine, by the material itself.

For all its imprecision and arbitrary application, semiotic theory nevertheless manages to offer a fresh perspective on sound codes in cinema, helping understand their mutual interactions and suggesting their relationship with film as a whole.

It would be absurd to claim that irrespective of the film being spoken in English it does not contain the code called "English," or that the minor

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[4]This approach was first proposed by André Bazin in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* (Bazin 1960). See also Cavell 1971.

or major key does not play a role in the cinematic message despite hearing Rachmaninov's Concerto No. 2 in David Lean's *Brief Encounter* or Chucijev's and Mironer's *Spring On Zarechnaya Street*. Nevertheless, I will argue that it is an entirely misplaced effort to analyze verbal utterances exclusively as a code of the given language, or treat a sonata or a symphony strictly as a musical piece. In my view, the cinematic message employs incomplete, isolated and deformed sound codes incorporating them into the system of cinematic interactions, ultimately infusing them with meanings that would be hardly imaginable on their own ground. Certain communicative and expressive qualities of those sound bits emerge only in effect of interplay within the cinematic structure. Detached, they are immediately drained of these qualities, although their own structure and substance remain intact. An English expression may have a fixed meaning outside the cinematic environment, but it may as well resonate differently when incorporated into the film. If we cannot understand what the characters are talking about although we speak the language and what is said is perfectly logical, or, conversely, if the message is sufficiently conveyed by a gesture or intonation, or both — this means that the message is governed by something else than just the linguistic code itself. What would that be?

By itself, French *chanson* cannot tell us that someone is thinking of a departed women. Similarly, a musical theme won't reveal the murderer or illuminate future events. Nevertheless, if the film score conveys an explicit or unambiguous message, has a fixed meaning and signifies something else than itself, it would mean that these powers are neither contingent on its inherent qualities nor governed by any musical code. What kind of code would it be?

Once we dismiss the multi-code notion of film, taken to mean parallel structures or complicated interplay of various independent codes, we may finally advance a wholly different idea, one that would emphasize a synthesis of codes, merged into a single complex code that picks only selected features of the original codes, thus transforming them, forging new relationships and shaping new qualities within the cinematic environment.

This approach isn't entirely new, it did not originate in semiotics either. I was exploring it in my earlier papers where I proposed to treat film as an integral audio visual unity, with the process of integration transforming and altering the aesthetics of the involved components (Helman 1964). Semiotic perspective paves the way for the argument that the process itself is powerful enough to reorganize meanings. Its final product forms a coherent message composed of elements incapable of communicating on their own.

In *Funkcja znakowa muzyki i słowa w filmie* [*Signification of Music*

and Word in Film] (Helman 1977), my analysis focused primarily on music, attempting to map out fundamental and far-reaching transformations of musical codes once they're incorporated into the cinematic structure. They retain, or rather may retain, their material quasi-identity, but in this new setup they cannot reach the receiver as musical expression *per se*. They become infused with new meanings, or become their component parts or carriers, sometimes assuming roles one would hardly associate with musical works. Finally, in film, music, much like any other sound, is delivered by electrical means. Transmission is to a considerable degree only a channel, but in modern or experimental cinema, where sound directors enjoy broad autonomy, transformations within the channel are becoming messages themselves, bearing the mark of those in charge of the recording process.

My analysis of musical substance produced some preliminary generalisations, which I would now like to verify by taking a closer look at the transformations of verbal expressions in film. Although more difficult to transform from a technical, aesthetical, and semiotic perspective, verbal expressions seem to be both a promising and recalcitrant material for verification of theoretical speculation or conclusions drawn from analyses of such peculiar matter as music.

It is not without consequence that verbal expression is not exclusive or even the most important vehicle of meaning. In film, verbal expression — governed by its specific code when considered in isolation — is always intertwined with other expressions, controlled by their respective sub-codes and ultimately by the master code of the film as a whole. Thus, a verbal expression can be defined as a component (or a co-agent, given its proactive behaviour) of a larger structure conveying a more general message and producing a far greater variety of meanings. More importantly, however, it is not the entire verbal expression that usually participates in the message-building process. Often, the structure engages only its specific elements, for example its tonal or behavioral aspect, understood along the lines of Ingarden's suggestion that spoken word in film is always a "sound behaviour," a sound of purely human origin (Ingarden 1958). The context, however, may put a spin on its original meaning, leaving it radically transformed away from its literal reading. My claim is that precisely this happens in the cinematic experience — the verbal expression conveys different information than itself. The viewer never gets the primary message, or departs from it.

In film, this invalidation or transformation of the original sense of words can be achieved in a number of ways, ultimately boiling down to two communicative scenarios.

Under the first scenario, specific components of the expression are physically eliminated or distorted, for example through muting or electroacoustic interference. The nature and goal of this operation is perceptible and usually quite clear.

The second scenario is much more complicated. Here, the sound track leaves the words intact, technical imperfections of the recording process aside. Still, the message is conveyed only via chosen components of the utterance, with the remaining part present but negligible. There are films that may be watched without the viewer speaking the language of the movie. Not that words are superfluous or unimportant, but because they communicate the most general senses where understanding of specific words and sentences is not a pre-requisite. One is satisfied by identifying standard situations such as "yells like a typical Italian," "lovers' tiff," "talking nonsense," etc.

The second scenario is possible precisely because informative content of the artistic message is redundant by default; it is also, so to say, redundant aesthetically. However, one would be inclined to call the encounter with the work of art — a reception, understanding, experiencing, — it is meant to be viewed as a whole, but not necessarily in all its details (I am well aware that this calls for some justification on the grounds of the psychology of reception, something I cannot demonstrate here, but some observations and experiments, most notably by such Gestalt psychologists as Rudolf Arnheim, seem to be supporting this claim). Familiar with this mechanism, the creator may design his work to be accessible through various levels of perception. For example, *Hiroshima, mon amour* features a subtle and complex musical code that can reach only a handful of viewers which does not mean that others are engaging with a mutilated and incomplete version of the work. The musical code is designed as a surplus value, an ornament of sorts, while the director is primarily focusing on reaching the viewer with the core message of the movie. For example, the attention is drawn to the interplay between hues (relations between objects may at that point be of lesser importance) or the tone of a dialogue (its sense allowed to fade away). But I shall not be developing here claims with little to support them. For my purposes it is enough to assume that the meaning of words often falls outside the essence of the cinematic message. Communicative and aesthetical qualities of other artistic measures are actively shaping the cinematic message — particularly when concentrated around verbal expression, creating an environment where words are exposed to various process in literature or daily life — after all it is often depicted in film - would be achievable only with the utmost difficulty, or even impossible.

In both those scenarios verbal expression interacts with anthropological sub-codes that follow the rules established by proxemics and kinesics, with paralinguistic phenomena also playing a vital role in the process. Additionally, it seems that it is a common practice to limit semantic independence of the text to the single sentence, which means that there is no place for larger semantic units carrying communicative value of its own.

Let's now exemplify the basic and most interesting variants of both models outlined above.

As mentioned above, the first scenario unfolds following the destruction of certain components within the verbal expression. But it does not mean that the most basic variant of such situation, muting of the dialogue, causes the verbal expression to evaporate entirely.

In *Dziura w ziemi* [*A Hole in the Ground*], the director, Andrzej Kondratiuk, shows a scene where people talk, or, should we say, engage in an intense shouting match. But although the camera is shooting a typically verbal behaviour, we are cut off from the sound. A geologist on a fieldwork assignment is visited by his girlfriend who brings him his sheepskin coat. A violent quarrel ensues, followed by the abrupt departure of the girl. The scene is silent, but rapid gestures and faces tell it all. One may wonder why Kondratiuk muted the scene, never providing justification for this lack of sound. Maybe this is just because the film is formally sophisticated, kooky, as some would say. But presented in this manner, the scene underscores banality of this mundane scene, stripping it of individual character and focusing on what all similar situations have in common. With satirical purpose in mind, Kondratiuk seeks to demonstrate not one unique event in life of a particular individual, but a paradigmatic situation where life and work clash. Also, he introduced the trick well into a film when the viewer is knowledgeable enough to imagine reactions of the protagonist. Kondratiuk was not obliged to narrate the event in full and left it roughly sketched.

In *The Structure of Crystals*, Krzysztof Zanussi visualises the metaphor: friends no longer speak the same language. The conversation between the two friends, Marek and Jan, is initially shot in a realistic convention, with the narrative retaining visual and acoustic qualities of the scene. But when Marek goes into details of the recent developments in physics, Jan, along with the average viewer, loses the thread; and the other way round, Marek cannot follow musical and philosophical discourse of Jan. To stress that what characters say is hermetic to the point of confusion, felt not only by the viewer but also by the characters themselves, Zanussi mutes the dialogue and fills the background with music.

Destruction of dialogue may be achieved not only through simple elimination of the spoken word. One can also arrive at this effect by emphasizing sound through electroacoustic manipulation of the word and eclipsing its semantic side. Above, I discussed a situation where verbal expression is conveyed via the behaviour of the speaker. Now, I would like to explore examples where the message consists of both behaviour and sound.

In film, such circumstances are usually set up by the introduction of some obscure language invented for the purposes of the movie. Strictly speaking, since it carries no communicative value, it is language by name only. Such a technique was employed by Chaplin in his parodies of official speeches in *City Lights*, in a song in *Modern Times*, or in a caricature of a fascist leader in *The Great Dictator*. In this way, the viewer is reached not with a particular speech or a particular song, but a model speech or song that seeks to expose their general features. This mode of communication was heretofore foreign to the cinema, traditionally considered unfit to transcend individual events. This situation is peculiar in that it never portrays either a presentation of the individual fact or a generalized conceptualization. It is always a mixture of both. Certain psychological observations appear to confirm that, although further inquiry into that matter would require a separate study.

Returning to the subject of pseudo-meaningful language, it seems that its most radical example is delivered in Claude Faraldo's *Themroc*. The director uses this method to show the corruption of the modern world, confronting it with humans longing for a more simple existence. His characters put this idea into life by exchanging apartments for caves, cannibalism, and collective life, with roaring replacing speech as the preferred mode of communication and self-expression. The film builds on the premise that, before turning into a cavemen, the protagonist did not use language either. This is because his social role was that of a cog in a machine, not really requiring him to engage in human communication. Other characters do sometimes speak, but their language is always artificial, reaching the viewer only as a meaningless sound. Faraldo's message is that speech no longer serves communication, eroding, as it is, into a formalised ritual. We do not know exactly what the characters say, but we can easily guess what they can, or rather must, say.

In *The Brig*, directed by the Mekas brothers, natural language undergoes similar mutation. The film is an adapted version of a play by Kenneth H. Brown produced by the Living Theater Group. Characters speak English throughout the whole performance, but, although specific phrases are left

intact, verbal communication is arranged in such way as to effectively eclipse and wipe out its sense. Viewers soon realise that under circumstances set by the movie, semantics plays no role in communication. *The Brig* takes place on a ship turned into a military prison. Any verbal exchange between the guards and prisoners follows a strict ritual, each situation is governed by a set of expressions, and situations and expressions never change. The prisoners are required to speak loud and clear, a rule enforced with absurd rigor. Any verbal exchange turns into a formalized screaming match, a nerve- and ear-wracking experience considering the unbearable noise and apparent absurdity of this quasi-communication. The ritual is self-fulfilling: each party exactly knows when and what needs to be said (the viewer, too, masters the code after the while), which is why there is no real need to hear and understand the others (the viewer is put in the exact same position), the initial gesture is enough to know how the situation will unfold. We quickly learn that rather than convey meaning, shouting functions as a part of a wholly different message — a prison ritual transformed into a mechanical dance. Linguistic code is dissected and incorporated into the cinematic code before the eyes of the viewer, exposing the mechanism governing transformation of functions and meanings. We are invited to observe not only the result but also the process itself.

Let's now consider the second model of communication. It will serve to demonstrate that electroacoustic manipulation is able to transform functions and meanings in a way which does not eliminate sounds or obscure the message.

In *Kod elektrycznego przekazu dźwięku w filmie* [*The Code of Electrical Sound Transfer in Film*], Wojciech Chyła explores various ways of how electroacoustic interference can contribute to the cinematic experience. He goes on to argue that a powerful impact can be achieved through distortion of the human voice. It may effectuate through a simple manipulation, or a more advanced interference, such as linear phase correction, specially designed microphone effects or non-linear transformations (Chyła 1977). Chyła provides examples where the very sound of the distorted word is used to achieve effects that transcend the meaning associated with the word itself. For example, in *Alphaville*, Jean-Luc Godard "lends symbolic sense to the fact that the word is subject to electroacoustic manipulation." The director, claims Chyła, seeks to stress the inhuman nature of the dictatorship run by alpha-60, a computer which took over the inert community of Alphaville. Chyła also cites a resonant experiment of Carmelo Bene, who filmed Wilde's *Salome* using special acoustic techniques to twist the meaning of the text

and produce a message far different than one resulting from conventional forms of dialogue delivery.

The meaning or function of verbal expression can also be transformed by other means. For example, the gravity of context opens possibilities for words to develop new meanings, offering in this respect far greater opportunities than would normally happen in the circumstances of daily life.

When appearing in the movie for the first time, the meaning of the phrase is naturally limited to one carried in words or sentences. But from that moment on it becomes embedded in the context, which is recalled when the phrase reappears and evokes its potential ambiguity. Thanks to this, it can be used in more complex and diverse ways than its initial meaning would suggest. Let's examine Bo Widerberg's *Ådalen 31*. A young protagonist by the name of Kjell befriends the daughter of the factory owner, Anke, and develops a habit of spending evenings with her family. In one of the seemingly redundant scenes the characters browse through an album of French painting, prompting Anke's mother to enthuse over the French accent displayed by Kjell. When Kjell meticulously pronounces "Pierre August Renoir," it simply signifies the name of the painter.

Well into the film, Kjell lets out an impassionate "Pierre August Renoir" when the father of the girl reveals that her mother talked Anke into an abortion. Siding with the young man rather than with his own wife, the father offers him words of sympathy, to which indignant Kjell responds by repeating the phrase. At this point the name of the painter has nothing to do with what the boy wants to communicate. What he does is mock high-brow aspirations of the bourgeoisie and its pretence to spiritual superiority. Kjell's cry vents hatred and contempt for what he clearly perceives as a crime. Of course, this may not be Kjell's exact words, but, by and large, this is how we emotionally resonate upon hearing the name of the painter cried out with such heartfelt passion. This would not be possible without the earlier album scene, where the name of the painter signifies nothing but itself. The new context decouples the phrase from its primary meaning, producing new senses, although triggered by the recollection of its original setting. In my opinion, this happens also with regard to film music and may also be responsible for attaching symbolic meaning to imagery. The creator must first show an item as an object, only then can it be utilised as a symbol, or, more generally, signify something. This refers only to symbols and meanings that are generated by the cinematic code exclusively for the purposes of the specific work. If one deals with "stereotypical connotations," as Eco terms them, well settled in culture and easily recognisable, the author is free to

use such objects, verbal phrases or musical themes directly, without the intermediate scene preparing ground for specific meaning.

Another kind of interference with verbal expressions can be found in the works of Miklós Jancsó, for example in *Silence and Cry*. Stopping short of erasing or deforming the word, Jancsó seeks to minimalise or even nullify its communicative function. We cannot, however, accuse the characters of using impenetrable jargon, wordplays or allusions. The verbal message is unclear and imprecise, but not because of the ill-chosen words, bizarre sentences or obscure phrases. Its meaning is elusive because it is designed for communication between the characters, not with the audience. In traditional cinematography, the viewer is typically ahead of the characters in terms of the developments on the screen. In modern cinema, however, the viewer may as well know as little as the protagonist. Jancsó's audience knows this much or nothing of the environment in which characters live and act, with personal dynamics on the screen shrouded in mystery.

Thus, we may be capable of grasping literal meaning of the dialogue, but, put bluntly, we do not get it. The reason for this is that Jancsó's experiments with spoken word are part of a broader strategy: formally, the movie fits in realistic convention and depicts events similar to the daily experience of the viewer. At the same time, Jancsó seeks to minimalize the importance of verbal components of the experience, instead emphasizing the code which usually escapes our attention, this being an anthropological code of distance — a key theme of the movie that ultimately serves to unlock the message that Jancsó wishes to convey. What is significant can be read from distances and how they are transgressed: there are distances between the oppressors and the victims, as well as distances existing within each particular group. I present here only brief summary of this phenomenon, with detailed analysis provided elsewhere (Helman 1974).

While exploring the rules governing sound sub-codes within the cinematic structure I have used rather extreme or model examples that film has to offer. This may invite criticism that my findings do not apply to more traditional cinema. It goes without saying that there are films, or rather whole genres, in which words are modelled on language used in daily life, on stage, or in literary dialogue. However, modern sound in films was born much later than the technical ability of providing the film with sound, and that particular element of cinema still remains in the early stages of development. For decades, film has been emulating other arts in the way of using sound and it is only now that it has started forging its unique approach to the problem. Nevertheless, some basic rules also guide these

hybrid creations of the interim period, which means that verbal expression is never independent in terms of aesthetics or communication, but rather electro-acoustically modified and transformed to proactively shape the final product of cinematic creation. This applies to and enables all examples discussed in this paper, as well as others not addressed in this article. The extent to which the emerging possibilities will materialize in the cinematic environment is left for the consideration of the director and the concept he chooses to pursue.

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