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Beware! Construction! A semiotic methodology for approaching avant-garde cinema

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This paper proposes a methodology for approaching avant-garde cinema based on Hjelmslev's theory of sign-function. Its starting point is the epistemological rupture constituted by Saussure's introduction of the concept of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, which radically alters the relation of the semiotic realm to what lies outside it. The paper uses Hjelmslev's model of semiotic stratification, concentrating on the strata of substance, their inner structure and their articulation with the extra-semiotic realm. It proposes some interpretive hypotheses regarding the lower levels of the strata, notably the incorporation in the model of the situations of production and reception. It goes on to apply the modified model to cinema, a particularly apt choice for studying the theoretical aporias regarding the inner structure of the expression-substance because of the complexity and heterogeneity of its expression-plane, as well as the multiplicity and lack of spatio-temporal simultaneity of its production and reception processes. The paper shows how some traditional ontological and epistemological positions regarding reality and materiality, as well as their aesthetic and ethical implications, underlie the ways cinema has been theorised. These issues are reformulated and resituated with the help of the Hjelmslevian model. The above sets the ground for attempting an inclusive meta-definition of avant-garde art. I argue that avant-garde is an approach to the arts, not a style, and therefore a structural description is needed to comprehend it. The definition I propose relies on the intimate connection between innovative artistic practice and a focus on the expression-plane, modelled on the prototype of revolution, sustained by a materialist ideology and motivated by a political demand: tell the truth, be revolution. In other words, attention to the expression-plane is the result of a political demand for epistemic sincerity; materiality becomes the path to know and, potentially, change reality. In the case of avant-garde cinema, this choice often takes the form of a struggle against 'realist' and 'reductivist' misconceptions, ie. the beliefs that cinema can give immediate access to reality and that it can be reduced to words. It is expressed as a search for cinema's specificity

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and the expansion of the limits of the cinematic medium, as well as the questioning and subversion of cinematic conventions, such as representational and narrative ones. The final part of the paper attempts to identify and interpret specific techniques used by avant-garde cinema and classify them under strategies aiming at the revelation of cinema's constructed nature through drawing attention to its expression-plane.

KEYWORDS avant-garde, cinema, Hjelmslev, expression-substance

Articulations of the semiotic with what lies outside it

The crux of Saussure's novelty in defining the sign can be summarised in its *fundamental semiotic arbitrariness*, which is the organising principle of a cluster of interrelated concepts. Crucially, it entails a completely different relation of the semiotic realm to what lies outside it.

Saussure's definition of the sign is logically the last step of his definition of *langue*, ie. of language as a system. The reason is that, in Saussure, the ontological status of the semiotic unit is secondary to semiotic structure. In other words, semiotic systems are not composed of signs; they are articulated into signs. In Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, *langue* is a social construction. It is different from the sum of the natural abilities of its users – and consequently of the human species in general – though these abilities make it possible. What is natural to the human species is the semiotic ability, which is clearly distinct from its products, ie. the different *langues* (Saussure 1972 [1916]: 25-26). *Langues* are the products of social communities, and therefore dependent on socio-historical conditions. Furthermore, a *langue* is different from its individual use, ie. *parole*, which it makes possible (30-31).

In Suassure's *Cours,* the sign is defined as the *inseparable* co-existence of two aspects of a *non-material* nature, the signifier and the signified (98-99). Arbitrariness and differentiality are intrinsic to this definition. The term 'arbitrary' does not mean 'dependent on the free choice of the speaking subject' (101) but 'unmotivated', ie. conventionally, socially constituted. On a first level, arbitrariness concerns the link between the signifier and the signified. This means that there is no intrinsic reason why a particular signified is paired with a particular signifier, and consequently no intrinsic connection between a sign and its referent. However, when combined with differentiality, arbitrariness gains a much more radical meaning. Differentiality is summarised by the famous dictum: 'in *langue* there are only differences [...] without positive terms' (100) and expounded in connection with the concept of 'linguistic value' (155-169). What *langue* does is to articulate the unperceivable and amorphous continua of sound and thought into double-faced formal units. Therefore, it is semiotic communities that articulate/shape the way they perceive the world through the process of giving it meaning. It is not just the relation between words and things, but the very distinction of the world into 'things' which

is no longer natural. Following Oswald Ducrot, I call this kind of arbitrariness 'fundamental', 'to distinguish [it] from the arbitrariness of each isolated sign' (Ducrot and Todorov 1972: 30).

Fundamental semiotic arbitrariness is Saussure's epistemological rupture. It means that signs gain their value from their position in the semiotic system and not because of some intrinsic similarity or analogy with the extra-semiotic world, or because of their reference to independently existing objects. Moreover, the completely formal definition of language as a semiotic system that this principle entails allows Saussure to disconnect it from the expression medium of sound and to envision 'natural', ie. verbal, languages as one kind of semiotic system among others, and linguistics as a subset of a future science of semiotics (Saussure 1972: 33).

As the individual sign is no longer constitutive and semiotic systems are not necessarily limited to 'natural languages', Louis Hjelmslev introduces the concept of 'sign-function', ie. the structure of the constitutive relations of the semiotic phenomenon. In his 1954 essay *La stratification du langage* (Hjelmslev 1971), he proposes a model of these relations which is consistent with Saussure.

Hjelmslev analyses semiotic systems around two distinctions: (a) Firstly, between content and expression, which results in two interdependent planes, the plane of content and the plane of expression; this distinction is specific to semiotic phenomena. And (b) secondly, between form and substance; terms that are defined as 'relative', their difference being one of degree of abstraction (Hjelmslev 1971: 56). From this double division result four *strata*: content-form, content-substance, expression-form, expression-substance. The sign-function proper is the relation between content-form and expression-form, which is a mutual dependence, a double implication: denotation. This is the equivalent of the Saussurean relation between the signified and the signifier. The relation between form and substance inside each plane is a one-way implication, where substance presupposes form but not the other way around: form is manifested by substance. The only two strata that have no immediate relation to each other are content-substance and expression-substance (Hjelmslev 1953: 68; 1971: 53-54).

Importantly, the substance-strata are 'semiotically formed' (1971: 57). To speak of the *manifestante* without implying that it is semiotically formed, Hjelmslev uses in French the term *matière*, in English *purport*, in Danish *mening*. Judging from the use of these terms, I think that a better rendering of the concept in English would be 'material'. One should note that Hjelmslev's materials (*matières/purports/meninger*) are also already in a certain sense formed, otherwise they would completely escape cognition (58). They are 'scientifically' formed and sciences are also semiotic systems. In Hjelsmlev's texts, there is confusion about whether the terms *purport* and *matière* should also be used for an even 'rawer' entity, that which escapes cognition altogether; this entity I refer to as *matter*.

Each substance-stratum consists of three levels: (1) the level of social, collective perceptions, which belongs to the stratification in the strict sense; and the (2) 'socio-biological' and (3) 'physical' levels, which do not. Level 3 depends on both levels 1 and 2, whereas level 2

depends on level 1. This does not mean that the existence of the physical entities as such depends on the semiotic substance. What depends on it is their formation, the process of being articulated by form, which constitutes them as relevant to the semiotic system. The process of articulation starts from the form stratum of each plane and is directed towards the levels of substance, which (the levels of substance) are chosen or shaped – but not created – out of the materials offered by the outside world. As Umberto Eco has observed, the continuum of the world, while amorphous, is not homogeneous; it has a 'grain' that limits what our forms can shape out of it (Eco 2000: 120-22). In other words, while a form may be manifested by substances taken from different materials, not all materials can be used for the manifestation of every form. For example, a national flag may be painted on wood or embroidered on silk, but it cannot be made out of sound.

Level 1 of substance, the level of social perceptions and 'the only immediately pertinent from a semiotic point-of-view' (Hjelmslev 1971: 61-62), is easily demarcated both in the content-plane and the expression-plane. However, the definition of levels 3 and 2 is problematic in both cases. I think that Hjelmslev's distinction between these two levels is loosely structured on a distinction between object and mechanism, between thing and action, which is philosophically difficult to maintain. It seems that sometimes Hjelmslev is slowed down by the metaphysical burden that his own work tends to question and transcend. I think that one would be more faithful to the radicalism of his work if one tried to interpret it in a wider sense.

With regard to level 2 of substance, a possible interpretation is implied by the use of the term 'conditions' in the description of level 2 of the content-substance. Hjelmslev's levels 2 and 3 of expression-substance already appear in Saussure's *Cours*, although not so systematically classified, as they stem immediately from Saussure's communication circuit (Saussure 1972: 20-30, 37, 66, 98, 157). Saussure distinguishes between the 'material' and 'sensuous' parts of the sound, which correspond to Hjelmslev's level 3 and level 1 of expression-substance, as well as between speech as mechanism of articulation or hearing and as acoustic phenomenon, which in turn correspond partially to Hjelmslev's levels 2 and 3 of expression-substance. With regard to the content-plane, level 2 of the content-substance is comprised of

> the socio-biological conditions and psycho-physiological mechanisms [...] allowing to the speaking subjects [...] to create, reproduce, evoke and handle in different ways the elements of appreciation. (Hjelmslev 1971: 61-62)

In the process of mapping the articulations of the semiotic with what lies outside it, Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos defines three 'exo-semiotic' (or, as he later called them, 'extra-semiotic') realms, ie. realms outside the semiotic: the 'exo-semiotic I', which is the material process of production; the 'exo-semiotic II', which is the material of expression; and the 'exo-semiotic III', which includes the referents (1986: 235-36). Crucial in his proposition is the definition of

the exo-semiotic I, in which we might include Hjelmslev's level 2 of content-substance, as the material process of production. I think that it should be understood as a condition of possibility and might be linked to a generalized concept of situation. Then, I think that level 2 of Hjelmslev's expression-substance could also belong to the exo-semiotic I, as the process of material production constitutes the condition of possibility of the expression-plane as well. The main divergence between Lagopoulos's exo-semiotic I and Hjelmslev's level 2 of substance lies in the direction of their causal connection to the semiotic, which may be resolved through the notion of condition of possibility, as opposed to a deductive causality.

Hjelmslev's level 3 of substance is quite clearly defined in the case of the expression-plane: it is the material of expression, Lagopoulos's exo-semiotic II. Level 3 of content-substance is more problematic, however. If one were to take Hjelmslev literally, level 3 of content-substance could correspond to the semantic units (1971: 59-60, 66), which is at odds with the principles of his model. In my opinion, a consistent application of the model would situate semantics at a different position, as it involves both a content and an expression plane, being semiotic *stricto sensu*. A more loose interpretation of the same passages in Hjelmslev could be to see level 3 of the content-substance as corresponding to the physical entities used as raw material for the community's apperceptions; these physical entities, however, are in a way already pre-semiotised. This interpretation would link content-substance level 3 to the referent, and I choose to follow it.

This investigation opens up the *aporia* of the degree of semiotisation of semiotic substance. We have seen that the division form-substance is a matter of degree and that the term 'substance' is used to denote the *manifestante* as semiotically formed. Nevertheless, while level 1 of substance, the level of social perceptions, is relevant to the semiotic function in the strict sense, the other levels are not. I think that this means that their semiotisation is not relevant to the sign-function under consideration. To the degree that their semiotisation is relevant to the specific sign-function, it has left a trace on its form and is therefore classified in level 1 of substance; the rest should be considered as exterior to it. Therefore, I think that as level 2 of substance of both planes we should classify the conditions of possibility of production, both semiotic and non-semiotic, both praxes and mechanisms. Level 3 of content-substance should be seen as corresponding to the referent, and yet cannot be identified with the realm of the independently and concretely existing world. Such a definition is in accord with Eco's approach, according to which the referent is abstract and conventional (Eco 1979: 66). Finally, level 3 of the expression-substance is composed of the materials from which level 1 of the expression-substance chooses to manifest expression-form. The recognition and distinction of these materials is the result of their semiotisation, which however is not relevant to the sign-function as such.

An intersection of the sign-function with the circuit of communication unavoidably takes place in levels 2 and 3 of the expression-substance, as they constitute the 'channel of communication'

in terms of communication theory (Eco 1979: 53). I think that the intersection of the sign-function with the communication circuit causes a certain redoubling of levels 2 and 3 of substance on both planes, because of the differentiation between the sides of *production* and *reception* of the message. Hjelmslev's level 2 of the expression-substance is clearly distinguished into the productive and the receptive mechanisms. Level 3 of the expression-substance is the material trace, the element transferred between the addressee and the receiver that makes communication possible; therefore, ideally unique. Nevertheless, practically it also often has aspects incorporating the difference between production and reception, including the dialectics of production and reproduction. Then, while the referent of a successful communication should ideally be common to addresser and addressee, in practice communication is always partial, and scientifically it is meaningful to study this potential divergence. Finally, level 2 of the content-substance, which in Hjelmslev seems to be comprised of the conditions forming the speaking subjects' appreciation, could easily be differentiated between those partaking of the addresser's appreciation formation and those partaking of the addressee's. Therefore, a more exact formulation of the sign-function would incorporate the sides of production and reception into substance.

In summary, the sign-function can be construed as a *form* bridging two *substances*. These are the two directions of the sign's articulation with the reality that is beyond it: through the content-plane and through the expression-plane. These two directions are doubled by the communication process into the sides of *production* and *reception* (Fig. 1).

The sign-function of cinema and its peculiar expression-plane

Cinema is a signification system, functioning at the epistemological level of *langue*, by which we mean that which underlies the way that every film produces meaning and which makes this production of meaning possible. We accept, following Eco, that 'semiotic systems do not necessarily have two articulations; [and that] the articulations are not necessarily fixed' (1979: 231).

Semiotic systems other than natural languages tend to be recognised by their expression-substance. Considering that the expression-substance is shaped by the expression-form – as seen in the previous section –, this means in reality that semiotic systems are (or should be) classified according to the kind of expression-form that they have, and not by their expression materials. The impossibility of defining semiosis by the expression materials becomes apparent if one remembers that the semiotic systems that make possible Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* choose their expression-substances from the same expression material, the sound wave; yet natural languages and music are definitely different kinds of semioses.

The semiotic identity of cinema, as recognised by its expression-plane, can be situated

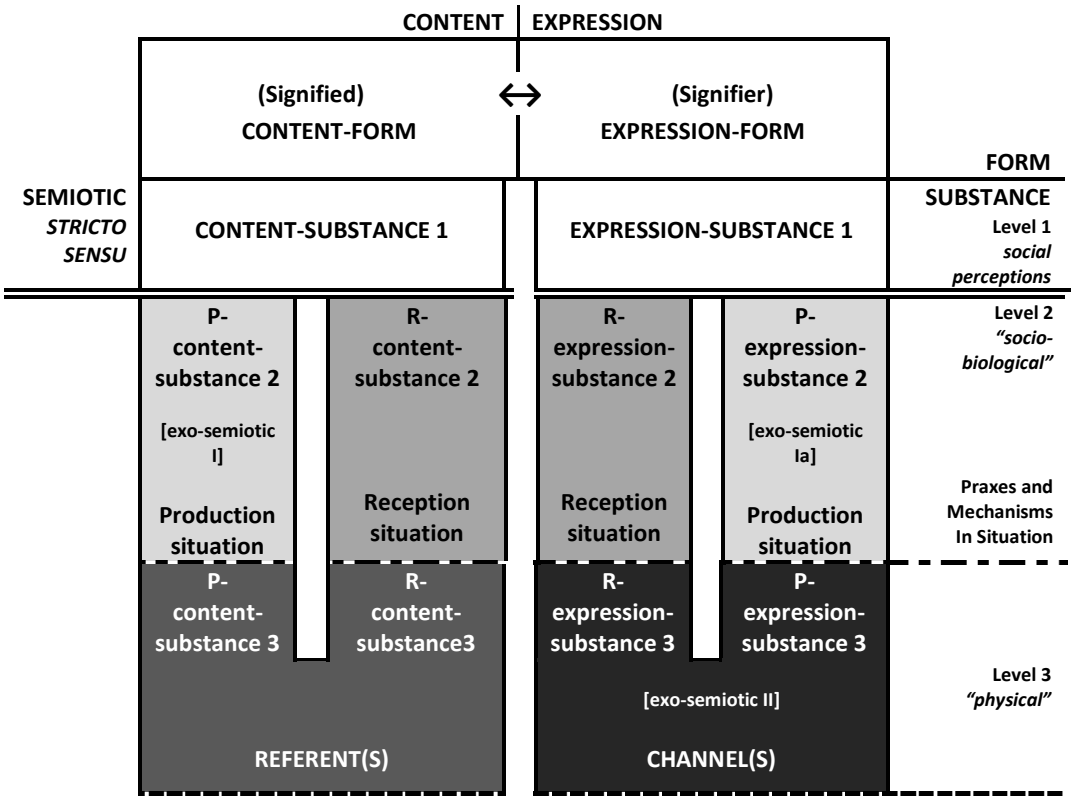

Figure 1. Modified model of the sign-function.

in four areas. Firstly, it includes images. It shares this characteristic with other semiotic systems, such as painting, all of which are addressed by visual semiotics. An image has an expression-form of two spatial dimensions. Secondly, cinema shares with photography the specificity of using photographic images. This characteristic was given exceptional importance, as it was argued that it radically affected their ontological status. In this, traditional celluloid films differ from animation, as well as from digitally produced films, however, the relevance of this distinction is questioned in the following section of the present essay. Thirdly, cinema uses a succession of static images in time, in order to create the impression of a moving image. The moving image is its *differentia specifica par excellence*. Cinema was born when technology made the moving image possible, and even in speaking films this remains its definitional characteristic. Christian Metz considers as specifically cinematic codes the ones pertaining to the moving image, while Eco identifies the cinematic code with the moving image alone. Moving image means a three-dimensional expression-form, of two spatial and one temporal dimensions. Fourthly, cinema since the 1930s includes auditory elements; it is a complex audio-visual system. As Metz has conceptualised it, cinema's composite expression-material is composed of five elements: moving photographic image, writing, speech, music, noises (1964: 71; 1971:

10, 17-8; 1977: 112-3). Eco disagrees that this complexity pertains to the level of cinema's *langue*, arguing that it takes place on the discursive level of film. This essay follows Metz's view. Moreover, Metz introduces the concept of *heterogeneity*, by which he refers to codes: cinema is heterogeneous because it uses different kinds of codes. I generalise the use of the term *heterogeneity* to describe all the different orders of complexity pertaining to cinema. Finally, a whole other group of questions arises from the fact of cinema's multiple, complex and non-fixed articulations, which are beyond the scope of the present essay.

Because of its peculiarities, cinema is a good case-study for someone wishing to investigate the complexities of the expression-plane in general. Firstly, the multidimensional and composite nature of its expression-form, and the different orders of heterogeneity of its expression-substance, make it a particularly good example for the study of the dialectics of manifestation between form and substance and between the different levels of substance, as well as for the ways in which the materials limit the range of these manifestations. Secondly, the obvious distance between the place and time of a film's production and the place and time of its reception makes apparent a distinction that exists in all kinds of semiosis, even if it tends to be disregarded in the case of (natural language) speech. Thirdly, cinema semiosis includes multiple processes, both in its production and its reception phases, and involves several manipulations of the material traces that support it. This opens up the *aporias* of the distinction between levels 2 and 3 of the expression-substance.

A provisional attempt to apply Hjelmslev's stratification to cinema could propose the following organisation: Cinema's form articulates in multiple ways with its semiotic substance, in a way combining Eco's (1976) triple articulation and the articulations of audial elements. Cinema's expression-form relies on two spatial and one temporal dimension. Its expression-substance 1 consists of the socially and collectively constituted perceptive image of moving light and shadows, as well as of sound. Its production-expression-substance 2 includes the processes and conditions of *mise-en-scène*, shooting, post-production etc. Its reception-expression-substance 2 includes the processes and conditions of reproduction, projection etc. Its expression-substance 3 includes everything from lightwaves and sound waves to the recording materials (Fig. 2).

Let us now try a closer examination of the expression-substance. The raw materials of cinema are moving light and shadows, as well as sound. These are registered on the celluloid visual and audio track, or more recently in digital form on a hard disc. These registrations are formed and processed in multiple ways, the final result being 'the film', both as text and as object. The film's (*stricto sensu* semiotic) expression-substance 1 consists of the socially constituted perceptive image of light and sound; therefore, its expression-substance 3, strictly speaking, can be no other than lightwaves and sound waves. This is its material support. This material support, however, exists only when projected; it does not persist in time. It needs to be registered into a different material support. This, in turn, is copied many times and transported to the reception situation, where it re-produces light and sound. This 'intermediate' material

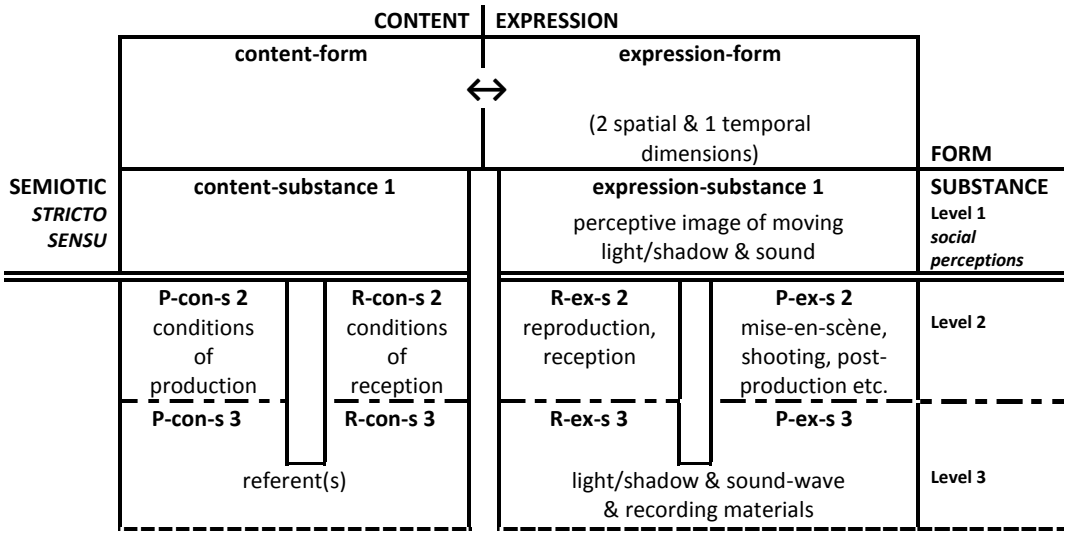

Figure 2. The modified model of the sign-function applied to cinema.

support, that travels in space and time, must necessarily be included in expression-substance 3; yet it has a different relation to the sign-function.

In expression-substance 2 belong the conditions of production and reception. The process of production can be conceptually divided into three phases, all of which usually take place in more than one space and time, and occasionally overlap. The first phase includes what happens before the recording processes, which range from *repérage* to the *in-situ mise-en-scène*; the second consists in the recording of image and sound, ie. mainly the shooting process; the third phase includes all the post-recording manipulations of the recorded material that result in the final product, such as editing and sound-mixing. All these processes may leave meaningful traces in the expression-form. On the side of reception one can also distinguish three phases, the first two of which do not belong to reception in the strict sense. The first includes the processes of copying and diffusion of the copies of the film and the second its re-production, ie. the screening. Finally, there is the film's reception in the strict sense by the members of the audience.

One also needs to take into account the mechanical and/or electronic equipment allowing the registration and formation of the material, and the mechanical and/or electronic equipment allowing its copying and then its projection, as well as the audience's apparatuses of perception. Following the analogy with the human perception apparatuses, we classify all the equipment in question in expression-substance 2, as part of the situations of production and reception. In the distinction between the material and the instrument that forms it, we choose to classify instruments as part of the processes.

An interesting question is where to classify the materials that take part in the processes,

but are not included in the material support of the sign-function. A particular example of this is the pre-filmic realm, ie. everything that stands in front of the camera. In our opinion, it is clear that the pre-filmic is part of the production situation, ie. expression-substance 2. However, as it is the material cause of the light and sound that constitutes the film's material support, it has a different relation to it than the recording process and equipment (Fig. 3).

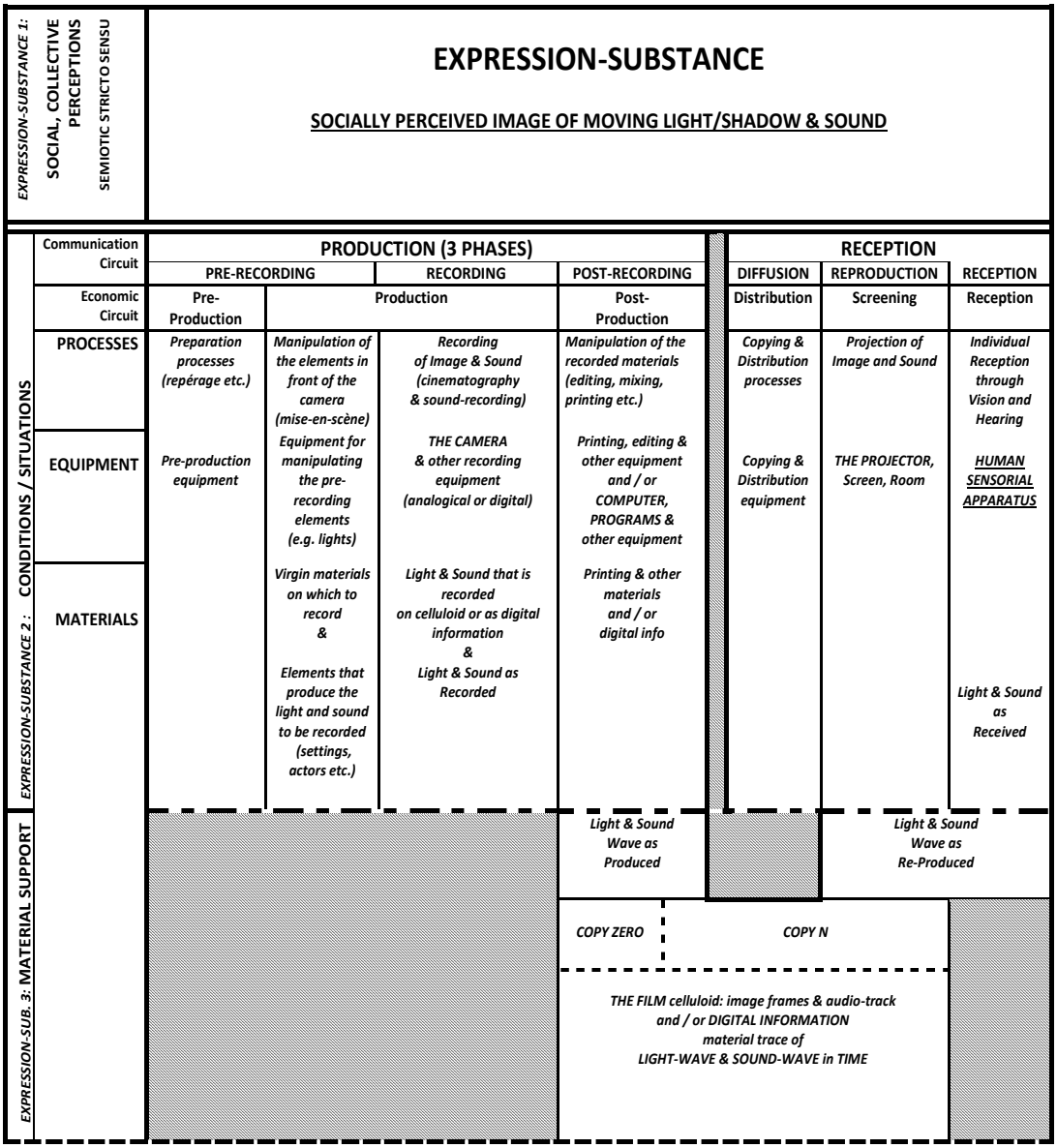

Figure 3. Detail: The expression-substance of cinema.

Reformulating traditional questions

Theories of language, signification and the arts always involve and presuppose premises with regard, on the one hand, to our relation to reality and, on the other, to the question of materiality, even if these remain unacknowledged. While obviously depending on what and how reality is, our relation to it is a question of epistemology. The accurate knowledge of reality as *adequatio*, ie. correspondence, constitutes one of the prevalent definitions of truth. The notion of truth, however, also carries moral implications, as it means not only gaining knowledge of reality but also accurately communicating it. In the history of thought, there is a constant slippage between these objective and subjective definitions – a moral demand on the subject to learn the truth and communicate it, with religious and/or political undertones. This mixture of epistemological and ethical implications is carried over to the concept of representation, which plays a central part in both the philosophy of language and the philosophy of art, even before these two meet in the linguistic turn of the 20th century. Definitions of the languages and the arts *as* representations have been the dominant, though by no means the only ones. In the philosophy of language, the relation to reality is re-formed as reference, and reference is conceived as representation. The debate over the naturalness or conventionality of this connection is at least as old as Plato's *Cratylus*. In theories of the arts, the concept of representation is often construed in terms of similarity and/or imitation, and is used both as definitional structure and as axiological criterion.

A second question regards materiality and the medium, which intimately concern both the definition of art and of the sign. On the one hand, the sign has been and is still commonly understood as the material means of expressing our thoughts. On the other, dealing with the materials has always been part of the definition of art. Moreover, the arts have been differentiated according to criteria of materiality: ie. the body-organs that produced them, or the human senses that perceived them, or the material means by which they were expressed. Whether viewed from an ontological or a phenomenal point of view, the materials of expression have often been conceived in hierarchical order according to different metaphysical criteria. Traditionally, language has been intimately connected to voice, sound, breath, and thus the medium of voice or sound has been given an exceptional position in the metaphysical hierarchy of the media (see, f. ex., Derrida 1967).

Furthermore, what is materiality and its value depends very much on the overall philosophical position. Plato, for example, considers materiality as accessible to our senses and not real; Aristotle considers it real but only accessible through the mediation of form; Kant, combining both, introduces the notion that our human constitution provides the forms by which we perceive the givens of intuition, yet we have no access to the things-in-themselves. Materiality, therefore, may be identical to reality or opposed to it, accessible or inaccessible to our senses, the criterion of truth or the cause of falsity.

Saussure's radically new and de-essentialised definition of the sign affected the traditional

definitions in many ways. For one, it no longer conceived signification as representation, emptying the metaphysical attributes of what was until then considered as the 'represented' and the 'representing'. Moreover, it undermined the metaphysical hierarchies between the different ways of communication and expression, including their study under the same discipline. Furthermore, semiotics affected the definition of art in two ways: directly, by the erasure of the demarcational line between art and non-art initiated by Roman Jakobson and the Prague Circle; and indirectly, by the de-essentialisation of the semiotic substance as formalised by Louis Hjelmslev and the Copenhagen Circle.

Let us situate reality and materiality in Hjelmslev's model, as presented in the previous section. The entire sign-function is real; semiotics is an ontologically monist theory. However, the semiotic strata, while real, are intelligible constructs. Literal materiality belongs to the realm beyond the semiotic. What traditional philosophy construed as relation to reality, in the new model is re-situated as a particular articulation of the content-substance. Discussions regarding the materiality of the arts prove to involve their entire expression-plane, including the non-material expression-form. Signification is re-defined as the insoluble relation between content-form and expression-form, and not by reference to the reality beyond the semiotic. The traditional questions regarding the relation between the signifier and the signified are analysed and re-situated into the conceptually distinct but interrelated issues of signification, reference and material support. Therefore, the question of the social constitution of a semiotic system can be reformulated as concerning, on the one hand, the relation between its content-plane and expression-plane and, on the other, the articulation of its content-substance; while the specificity of non-linguistic semiotic systems can be reformulated as concerning their expression-substance, and how this affects the previous question (Fig. 4).

The concept of 'realism' is a wild card in the debates over reality and materiality. Ontological realism is the belief in the existence of a subject-independent reality, while epistemological realism is the belief that humans have the ability to access (know) it. Epistemological anti-realism or moderated realism – ie. the beliefs that humans have either no access to reality at all or a limited and mediated access to it – can very well co-exist with ontological realism, but they make its proof problematic. The concept of realism enters the arts and literature in the 19th century, and although it presupposes ontological and epistemological commitments, it does not immediately concern them. Realism in this context is a canonical and axiological discourse regarding stylistic and compositional principles of the art-works, on the one hand, and their social and aesthetic value, on the other. Opposing Romanticism and idealisation, and stressing the social function of art, it views the artist as an objective observer of reality. Philosophically, aesthetic realism is an expression of the traditional metaphysical desire of form-independent content and un-mediated access to the referent. Practically, it has meant the adoption of particular styles of expression and, contradictory as it may be, of particular subject matters (see Beardsley 1975: 290-98). In the 20th century, the advent of modernism and the avant-gardes

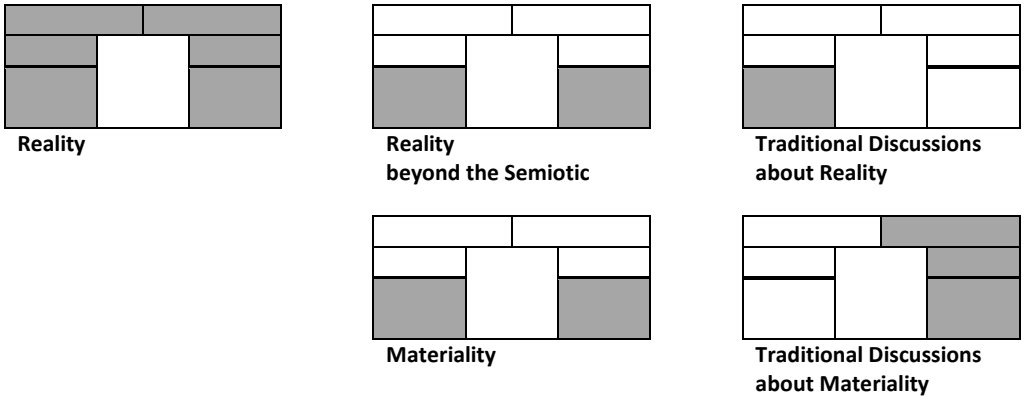

Figure 4. Reformulating traditional questions regarding reality and materiality.

strongly questioned both its theoretical premises and its aesthetic conventions, leading to either its complete abandonment or its total re-formulation. It is worth noting that its premises are incompatible with structural semiotics.

Since its beginnings, cinema was considered to have a particular relation to reality. Until World War II, the assumed closeness of this relation had impeded cinema's inclusion in the arts; from that point on it became an argument in its favour (Casetti 2000: 26). This assumed privileged relation to reality has had different foundations. First is the notion of cinema as an unmediated opening to reality. This position is easily refuted by a listing of the technical mediations and creative choices that lead to the construction of a film: from the choice of what to shoot and the manipulation of the pre-filmic elements to the frame and shooting choices, from *découpage* and editing to sound-design and mixing. A certain improvement on the previous notion conceives cinema as a neutral recording of an already-coded reality. This formulation still greatly underestimates the number of choices and the degree of manipulation this 'recording' allows, or rather necessitates. A third and fourth lines of argument are based on the bond of similarity of the iconic signs and the concept of indexicality, both of which have been convincingly refuted by Eco (1979: vii, 62, 66, 115-19, 161-65, 178, 186, 190-217, 219-24, 231-34). One needs to deal separately with the literal indexicality of the photographic technologies, what André Bazin (1958) has called the 'ontology of the photographic image' and compared, as proof of existence, to the Sacred Shroud of Turin. Nevertheless, this link does not connect the signified to its referent, but the material trace to its conditions of production. Therefore, it does not constitute proof of existence of its referent and does not affect the conventionality of cinematic semiosis. A final line of argument is based on the richness of the sense stimuli that cinema provides. The greater the range of sense stimuli an art involves, the closer it comes to our experience of reality, the argument goes. What this underestimates is the fact that the cinematic experience is still very much 'poorer' than our everyday experience.

Moreover, it founds cinema's assumed closeness to reality on a persuasive virtuality.

This line of argument displaces the discussion from the belief that cinema has a privileged relation to reality to the observation that it *gives the impression of* having such a relation, and to the subsequent question of why it is so. This is cinema's notorious concept of *impression*, *illusion* or *effect of reality*, which practically means the forgetfulness of a film's conventional and constructed nature. There are three groups of reasons given for this impression. The first group involves the constitution of the human perceptual apparatus, starting with the *phi*-phenomenon that allows us to see as continuous movement the rapid succession of static images. The second draws on psychoanalytical concepts and research, and explains the function of identification mechanisms. The third group of reasons relies on internal coherence and previously constituted conventions of representation.

These issues have in the history of cinema theory been entangled with the different aesthetic ideologies regarding realism. In this context, the questions of what cinema is and how it functions have been subordinated to questions about what is a good film and what kind of films should be made. Realism has had a particularly strong hold on cinema theory and criticism throughout the 20th century, a fact which sets cinema apart from the other arts. Determining factors in the conceptualisation of realism in cinema have been, on the one hand, the canon developed by the American studio film industry, and on the other, the negotiation of Marxist demands. A turning-point in the debate has been the theorisation of the Italian Neo-Realist movement. Finally, in the context of the French Nouvelle Vague, the journals *Cinéthique* and *Cahiers du Cinéma* distanced themselves from realism, judging it to be an idealist theory; they were probably right (Casetti 2000: 25-47).

The structural revolution of the avant-garde and the demand for epistemic sincerity

Avant-garde art, along with Saussurean semiotics, Marxian politics and Freudian psychoanalysis, is part of the epistemological shift which defined the 20th century. It has radically changed the definition of art founded by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. If one wishes to understand the 20th century, one could not find a better starting point. Avant-garde expresses the violently optimistic spirit of the previous century, youthful and terrifying and fragile at the same time. Many of its novelties have been incorporated unacknowledged into popular culture, commercialized by advertisement, diffused by the new technologies and, unknowingly, have changed the way we see the world.

As a term, 'avant-garde' originates in military jargon. It is the French term for the 'vanguard' or 'advance guard', which designates the small group of soldiers that precedes the advance of the main force of an army. It combines the semes of 'small', 'leading' and 'in increased

danger', carrying a connotation of courage or even heroism. In the realm of ideas, it was first used in the late 18th century in the context of the French Revolution. It was attributed to the philosophers and intellectuals of the Enlightenment who were considered to open the path for political and social changes. The concept was introduced into the field of the arts in the early 19th century by the Saint-Simonians and interacted with the figure of the Romantic artist as prophet and visionary. By the beginning of the 20th century, the function of avant-garde was claimed by both revolutionary parties and artistic movements. In the context of art, it has since become a historical determination. There were two peak periods of the avant-garde art movements: (a) the 'historical' avant-gardes of the early 20th century up to the 1930s; and (b) the 'neo-avant-gardes', mainly during the 1960s and 1970s (see e.g. Bürger 1984).

'Avant-garde' is an approach to art and not a style. This explains why it denotes a wide range of extremely dissimilar art movements and art works. Moreover, it explains why its agents perform a constant conceptual slippage between the definition of art as avant-garde and avant-garde as a kind of art; from an avant-garde artist's point of view, there is no other kind. To this difficulty must be added the general questioning of the existence of the category of art as such. Furthermore, to the degree that avant-garde artists define avant-garde art, they do so modelling it on their own practices, and thus excluding others. It is the retrospective meta-definitions of art theory that allow one to see avant-garde art as a phenomenon.

Yet, there are certain unresolved disagreements between these definitions. One debate concerns whether avant-garde art should be defined in terms of form experimentation or with regard to its social function (Poggioli 1981; Bürger 1984). Another concerns the primacy of form or political radicalism in its definition. Moreover, the dialectical relation and relative positioning of the avant-gardes with regard to artistic modernism is also debated: to put it simply, the question is whether the avant-gardes were oppositional to the modernist project or belonged to it. Per Bäckström argues that the key for untangling this complexity may be found in the divergence in theory of national traditions, which he classifies into Germanic, Romance and Anglo-American (Bäckström 2007). Following a structuralist and post-structuralist interpretation (Derrida 1967, Kristeva 1974), this essay argues that the form-oriented and the social-function-oriented definitions of avant-garde are indissolubly connected. They describe the same structural move. Furthermore, this essay does not consider the avant-gardes as oppositional to modernism *per se*, but rather as its most radical expression; however, the national and institutionalised high modernisms were opposed to several principles of the avant-gardes, and therefore cannot be classified as such.

Avant-garde art combines formal experimentation with ideological radicalism, and all its defining characteristics result from a constitutive questioning of established categories. Its definition includes an element of structural innovation at the level of the signifier and the destabilisation of the institution of art, a high degree of awareness of the theoretical implications of any practice, the link between art and life, and the interdependence of form and content.

From this follows that radical content cannot exist without radical form; it may also be implied that a radical form in itself constitutes a radical content.

Structuralist semiotics is connected both conceptually and historically to the historical avant-gardes, while its poststructuralist mutation is closely interlinked to the neo-avant-gardes. Semiotics has totally transformed the traditional definitional connection of art to materiality. What used to be the essential link to materiality as definitional of the independent realm of art was changed into a functional prioritisation of the signifier as definitional of the poetic function of messages in general (Jakobson 1987: 69-70). Jakobson's poetic function, along with the Russian Formalists' concepts of defamiliarisation, has been the basis for a new, semiotic definition of art, which was formed around two axes: the focus on the expression-plane and innovating research, as well as their intimate connection (Kristeva 1974; Eco 1979: 261-76). This was formulated through a constant two-directional interaction between semiotic theory and the avant-gardes, and acted both as a descriptive definition for the semiotic study of art and as a prescriptive definition for avant-garde art practice.

It is meaningless to speak of avant-garde art without an awareness of its revolutionary subtext. The link was conscious and obvious to those who theorised the avant-gardes from a close vantage point. The Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, writing his essay Art as Technique in Russia in 1917, obviously modelled art's definitional device of 'defamiliarisation' on a revolutionary reference; while poststructuralist Julia Kristeva is even more outspoken about what, in her 1974 homonymous text, she terms '*la révolution du langage poétique*'. In other words, 'revolution', 'art' and 'avant-garde art' seem to share the same conceptual structure. Each of them is defined as an act of rupture with an existing structure and, possibly, founding a new one. Through a game between isomorphism and synecdoche, they become almost synonymous.

In this context, it is important to observe how the intensified interest in the expression-plane is situated with regard to the relation of art to life. Traditionally, such an attention would be conceived as a turn of art to itself and away from the world, the clearest formulation of which would be the 'art for art's sake' dictum. However, the avant-gardes' focus on the expression-plane is no longer conceived as a distantiation with regard to non-semiotic reality but as a way back to it. Hjelmslev's model of the sign-function, combined with a discourse of sincerity, can begin to suggest the reasons. Focusing on the expression-plane, which includes a way toward the non-semiotic realm as much as the content-plane does, becomes a strategy to counteract the illusion of the independence of the content-plane and of the 'naturalness' of reference.

There is a series of conceptual steps and double interpretations, that allow for stronger and weaker claims, which connect the focus on the expression-plane with change and ultimately with revolution; ideologically, this preference is not unrelated to materialism. For example, the interest in materiality is the result of an interest in the real structure of reality; the remembrance of the existence of the expression-plane reveals the constructed and ideological nature of our

perceptions and conceptions; the functional primacy of the expression-plane, that characterises art in general, becomes a strategy for drawing attention to it, which is a conscious choice; drawing attention to something implies making people see what they had not previously seen; to see what was there but one couldn't see is the process of becoming conscious; by becoming conscious of a structure, one questions the 'naturalness' of its existence and, therefore, opens up the possibility of changing it; 'making strange' something, so as to draw attention to it, already changes it to a certain degree; this change is already creating something new; a new way of expression, a new art, a new language is already a new reality; which, moreover, changes the way we see and think about (non-semiotic) reality; which may even lead to our changing (non-semiotic) reality. To sum up, for avant-garde art, the prototype structure is revolution, the underlying ontology is materialism, and the main aesthetic principle is defined by a political-ethical demand with regard to its social function: tell the truth, free the people, be (and cause) revolution. Materiality becomes the path to knowing (and changing) reality.

The dialectics of reality and materiality in defining avant-garde cinema

The relation of cinema to both modernism and the avant-gardes is peculiar, for reasons related to its short history, technological basis and wide popularity. Firstly, when cinema appeared at the end of the 19th century, it was considered modern as such: as a technology and as a social phenomenon, it inspired poets and writers who were uninterested in its potentialities as a means of expression. Secondly, forefathers and classics of this new art were the representatives of the historical avant-garde movements; there was not much tradition to revolt against. Thirdly, its newness and desire for acceptance with the status of art led cinema to an extensive use of concepts and techniques borrowed from the other arts, among which were representational elements abandoned by the visual arts and 19th-century narrative conventions challenged by literature. Fourthly, the cost of its production and the wide diffusion of its products very soon turned it into an industry, which promoted a conservative aesthetic in order to appeal to investors and attract a wide public. By the mid-1940s, Hollywood's cultural imperialism had made a small group of expressive choices the norm and everything else the exception. In this context, anything diverging from the Hollywood norm was perceived as daring, even avant-garde, and to a certain degree, correctly so. Possibly for this reason, 'avant-garde', despite its many definitional *aporias*, is a more widely used category in cinema than 'modernism'. Whom should one consider as paradigmatically modernist in cinema, Welles or Rossellini? (Aumont 2007) And is the French Nouvelle Vague modernist in general or avant-garde in particular?

'Avant-garde' is the 'other' cinema. There have been multiple terms to describe it – such as

'non-narrative', 'poetic', 'experimental' – none of which is exactly co-extensive with any other, each of which enters an equally controversial and complicated definitional dialectics. There are many and conflicting definitions of avant-garde cinema (see Albera 2005, Brenez 2006, Le Grice 2001, Noguez 2010, Adams Sitney 1987, Voguel 1974). The most significant theoretical disagreement lies in the primacy of radicalism of form or content, despite the consensus regarding their close interconnection. In other words, on the one hand, the question is at which degree of unconventionality and novelty of form a film deserves to be called avant-garde; and on the other, whether unconventional form is enough to constitute a subversive message. A related debate concerns the use of the term 'experimental' as identical or distinguishable from the term 'avant-garde' (see e.g. Albera 2005, Noguez 2010). Another debate concerns avant-garde cinema's dialogue with the other visual arts and new audio-visual technologies (see e.g. Le Grice 2001).

In constructing a working definition that is as inclusive as possible without losing its heuristic utility, I propose five groups of criteria for recognising a film as avant-garde. Firstly, (a) there is form experimentation. One should repeat that form experimentation is a structural demand and does not imply particular stylistic choices, visual or other. Secondly, (b) avant-garde cinema combines form experimentation with a certain ideological radicalism – though not necessarily overtly political – as well as with the consciousness of the political significance and potential of form. These characteristics are complemented by extra-semiotic characteristics, such as (c) alternative methods of production and distribution; (d) the self-awareness of the filmmakers; and (e) the classification by theorists, critics and the wider public. I think that having some characteristic from the first group (a) is a necessary condition for classifying a film as avant-garde, and it must be accompanied by at least one characteristic from some other group. Moreover, group (a) in a sense already includes group (b), because of the interdependency of expression-form and content-form.

As was the case with the avant-gardes in general, the cinema avant-gardes also focused on materiality as the path to know reality. The struggles against the 'realist' and 'reductivist' misconceptions in cinema, ie. against the beliefs that cinema can give immediate access to reality and that it can be reduced to words, were interconnected and of central importance to them.

Filmmakers of the historical avant-gardes have stressed in their texts the importance of cinema's visuality and temporality, in terms such as Richter's 'visual rhythm', Epstein's 'photogenie', Dulac's 'visual film', 'optical harmonies' and 'music of silence', and Eisenstein's 'hieroglyphics' (in Adams Sitney 1987). They argued that cinema's potentialities lie in the use of its specific materials, and not in the imitation of novelistic or theatrical techniques. In this context, the introduction of sound caused a major theoretical debate, particularly with regard to its 'talking' aspect. This was eventually resolved by the acceptance of sound into cinema's specificity, no longer as an impoverishing and 'naturalising' element, but as increasing and enriching its complexity. Importance was given to the non-synchronous use and displacement between the elements of cinema's multileveled heterogeneity. Gradually, the interest in the expression-plane

shifted from the semiotic expression-form to the semiotic expression-substance, and further on to the extra-semiotic materials and processes. By the early 1960s, the research on cinema's specificity had evolved into research on its conceptual and expressive borderlines, and then on the expansion of its apparatus and its opening to other fields.

As we have explained previously, cinema since its beginnings has been haunted by its relation to reality. One can distinguish three approaches to reality: the first has formed the so-called classic narrative cinema as exemplified by classical Hollywood films. This approach is based on a slippage in the significance of the concept of 'similarity'. 'To look like the real' because of being faithful to the real, becomes 'to look like the real' in the sense of giving the impression of being real. So truthfulness regresses in favour of verisimilitude. A number of techniques concerning visual representation and narration have led to highly codified conventions, with the expressed purpose of minimising the audience's awareness of the constructed nature of film. These conventions are socio-historically conditioned, which becomes quite obvious if we consider the speed by which they lose their effectiveness as illusions of reality.

A second approach to realism aspires to the minimisation of mediation. It includes diverse cinema movements – from Neo-Realism to Free Cinema and *cinéma-verité* – and occasionally crosses paths with the avant-gardes. In this case, the purpose of showing things 'as they are' concentrates on the lessening of their distortion by the process of mediation. Techniques of this approach include shooting outside studios, without sets and artificial lighting, using non-professional actors, using wider shots of longer duration in order not to manipulate the audience's reception too closely, using more loosely connected and open-ended narrative structures etc. However, these techniques do not cease to constitute stylistic choices rather than an un-mediated approach to reality. One may argue that they are less manipulative and repressive, but they are no closer to the referent.

A third approach to truthfulness in cinema concentrates on sincerity, on making the audience aware of the fact of the mediated nature of cinema's relation to reality. This has been one of the constant underlying ideological positions of avant-garde film-making. From this point of view, the first kind of realism is considered not only ontologically mistaken but morally fraudulent, politically repressive and artistically non-cinematic. The second kind of realism would simply be a self-deception. Avant-garde film-makers' version of truthfulness as sincerity fits well with their exploration of cinema's characteristics and expansion of its limits. Their questioning goes further back from the realistic conventions of representation to the conventionality of representation as such, both on the levels of visual representation and of narration.

To start with, one can argue that not to comply with a convention is by itself an emancipatory move, particularly if one reveals the convention's conventional nature in the process. Nevertheless, there are more specific implications with regard to some avant-garde film choices. Firstly, to question representation is to question how reality is turned into concepts. This means to question, on the one hand, specific representations and, on the other, the very pos-

sibility of representation. To reveal aesthetic realism as conventional and ideological, as well as to reveal the constructed nature of film, is to struggle against an illusion, with ethical and political implications. Secondly, to deny classical narration means both to deny the dominant narrative and to oppose the narrative mechanisms of audience manipulation. It has been convincingly argued that the classical, so-called Aristotelian structure of narration is indissolubly linked to the Oedipal itinerary, as well as to capitalist and patriarchal ideology. Moreover, it functions manipulatively, contributing to the spectators' identification with the film and, therefore, diminishing their critical position with regard to what they see. Thirdly, the focus on medium is related to the notion of materialism. The importance of the signifier, and then of the semiotic and extra-semiotic substance, is meant as a truthful relation to the Real, as opposed to aesthetic realism which can be construed as nothing more than a kind of philosophical idealism. Finally, to alter what people thought of as eternal and as going without saying changes the way that they see the world. Questioning the given and proposing new forms may open up the possibility for the new and the unforeseen.

Strategies and techniques of avant-garde cinema

Avant-garde films apply certain interrelated strategies to draw attention to their expression-plane and, therefore, to their conventional and constructed nature. I have distinguished these strategies for analytical reasons, although practically they often overlap and a specific technique may be the result of the combination of several strategies. The listing that follows is not meant to be exhaustive.

A first strategy is self-reference through thematisation. This is not necessarily an avant-garde choice. It is perfectly possible to make a conventional film on the subject of filmmaking. When combined with other strategies, though, thematisation can act as a narrative excuse to reveal construction or as a way to draw additional attention to it. This is what happens in Dziga Vertov's famous 1929 film *The Man with a Movie Camera*, whose plot intertwines a day in the Soviet Union with the processes of making and receiving a film (Fig. 5).

A second strategy is not to use some cinematic conventions, which in practice means consciously breaking them, and thus reminding the audience that they are conventional, ie. constructed. This can be done in different degrees, ranging from small interferences with the conventions to radical alterations. The 'broken' conventions may concern visual representation, such as the 180-degree rule and establishing shots, or narration, such as linear time and the Aristotelian structure. 'Jumping the line', for example, which often happens in *Nouvelle Vague* films, causes a momentary spatial confusion for the audience that throws them out of the illusion of reality and obliges them to think of the existence of the camera.

A third strategy is to draw attention to a potentiality by actually using it. Of course, usually

Figure 5. *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929).

the fact that a potentiality is used is not enough to draw attention to it, unless it has rarely been used before. It is the way that it is used that becomes important. A revealing way may be unusual (see previous strategy), or particularly consistent, or very extreme. For example, a very rich exploration of the complexities of cinematic heterogeneity is performed in the 1977 Greek film *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae* by Antoinetta Angelidi, where the elements of heterogeneity are used both in displacement and in *contrapuncto*. By rearranging already codified messages and juxtaposing materials, the film comments both on the messages themselves and on the functioning of cinematic semiosis (Fig. 6).

A fourth strategy pertains to the focusing on the borderline between the semiotic and

Figure 6. *Idées Fixes/Dies Irae* (Antoinetta Angelidi, 1977).

its outside. This can be done in several ways, including the semiotisation of extra-semiotic elements. Let us look at some techniques to draw attention to the articulation with the extra-semiotic elements of the expression-plane (the examples are taken from Adams Sitney 1987; Le Grice 2001; Brenez 2006). One should note that the described techniques usually also simultaneously exemplify some of the strategies mentioned above.

The notion of the cinema's recording instruments as generating their own subject-matter appears already with the historical avant-gardes, with Dziga Vertov's 'mechanical eye' and Germaine Dulac's 'visual films'. Particularly interesting in this respect is the work of Michael Snow, who explores the potentialities of camera movement. For example, the 1967 film *Wavelength* develops in a continuous 45-minutes zoom, while in the 1971 film *La région centrale* the camera moves around in 360 degrees in every direction and on every plane of a sphere. Another group of strategies aims at rendering the audience aware of the event of shooting. An example of this is Andy Warhol's work between 1963 and 1965, with the deliberate use of continuous takes, the inclusion of white flare at the end of the reels, and the background noise and director's instructions in the soundtrack.

Another area of investigation is the film strip itself, as a material and as an object. Drawing attention to the physical nature of the film starts with using the sub-semiotic elements of the cinematic image. These can be the grain of the photographic image, the sprockets and frame lines, and accidental elements such as scratches and dirt; and later on, the pixels and electronic noise. An example of this is George Landow's 1965 *Film in Which There Appear Sprocket Holes, Edge Lettering, Dust Particles etc.* A different strategy is to completely subtract the camera as a recording apparatus. Many techniques have been employed to leave a trace on the film, such as painting on it or scratching it. One of the first attempts was Man Ray's 'rayogram' technique, which consisted in laying small objects like dust, nails, pins and springs directly onto the film before exposure. Other strategies focus on printing, processing, re-filming, re-copying. Furthermore, drawing attention to the film strip as an object may even change its function, turning it into a surface for added layers of materials or into an independent exhibit – in which cases it is no longer part of a cinema sign-function.

Editing as both signifying and mechanical process has been given attention since the 1920s Soviet theories of editing. In the 1960s, metric film-makers, particularly Peter Kubelka, transfer editing from the level of the shot to the level of the frame. Kubelka stressed the fact that motion in cinema is an illusion and introduced the technique of single-frame editing. In his completely abstract 1960 film *Arnulf Rainer*, he uses only empty and black film frames, and empty and white sound, in specific relations, in order to create with these absolutely first materials a film repeatable by anyone. The exploration and expansion of the audience's perceptive apparatus has, of course, as initial historical reference Marcel Duchamp's 1926 *Anémic Cinéma* and includes Kubelka's, Conrad's and Sharits' 'flicker-films'.

Experimenting on the projector's flicker as a form in its own right is one of the techniques

focusing on the projecting apparatus. Another strategy changes the conventional use of the projector; for example by the technique of film-slip, ie. the continuous motion of the film through the gate rather than the intermittent phasing of shutter and claw. Another group of strategies draws attention to the screen – changing its shape, its material, replacing it with different objects or multiplying it in number. Another strategy completely subtracts the film from the process of projection. This was first thought of by the Lettrists, who asked "Can we do films without film?" The work of Malcom Le Grice explores this possibility. For example, in his 1971 *Horror Film 1*, he interrupts the beam of pure colour projections, creating shadow on the screen. Anthony McCall went further with his solid-light installations, starting with the 1973 *Line Describing a Cone* and going further by subtracting even the projector in his *Long Film for Ambient Light*. The expansion of the event of the reception has its origin in the 1951 *Le film est déjà commencé?* by Maurice Lemaître, where actors *in vivo* participated in the performance. In Isidore Isou's 1960 *Le film sup ou la salle des idiots*, the spectators were given materials to make their own films. Audience participation has since been invited in many different ways, recently also through interactive computer programs.

What is conventionally considered as completely extra-semiotic are the material conditions, economic and working relations, and institutions that surround the processes of production and diffusion of the films. These too become significant for avant-garde film-making, which not only uses alternative methods such as single-hand film-making or co-operatives of production and distribution, but also incorporates them into the film itself. Most interesting in this respect are the cases of Peter Watkins and Armand Gatti, where the process of genesis of the films is equally as important as the result.

Closing, one could make a few observations. Firstly, the strategy of semiotising extra-semiotic elements of the expression-substance is particularly intriguing, precisely because the moment they are semiotised, they cease being extra-semiotic, moving on the borderline against a further extra-semiotic. Secondly, a constant risk faced by some of the proposed techniques is to fall back outside semiosis, or even outside perception. Kubelka's single-frame editing, for example, is completely unperceivable and therefore unable to produce signification. It functions only in combination with its creator's verbal explications and the viewing of its celluloid material as a spatial exhibit, which allows one to perceive it as co-existing series of frames. This is not necessarily a problem but it means that such a work includes on equal footing the two different uses of the same material (ie. its formation by different forms, which belong to different sign-functions, one cinematic, the other not) and the verbal explanation. Thirdly, these techniques play and often cross the borderlines of cinema semiosis toward other kinds of semiosis, precisely because the kinds of semiosis are not defined by material, while materials are not demarcated in a metaphysically stable way. This means that often these works cease to be cinema. This move, however, is meaningful for understanding cinema. Therefore, fourthly, the great gift avant-garde offers us is finding, revealing and opening up potentialities;

potentialities with regard both to filmmaking practice and to understanding films, cinema and signification in general.

Saussurean semiotics and avant-garde art belong to the same epistemological shift that defined the 20th century. Among their shared characteristics are the belief in the constructed nature of the semiotic realm and the demand for a de-naturalisation of ideology. As Louis Althusser puts it: 'One of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology' (1970: 151). Uncovering and dismantling ideology is indeed a liberating act.

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