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FILM DISCOURSE AS A POWERFUL FORM OF MEDIA AND ITS
MULTI-SEMIOTIC FEATURES

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Abstract

Cinematography is one of the most influential means of mass communication. This unique cultural phenomenon is characterised by rapid development, global distribution and impact on the audience worldwide. Having synthesised the achievements of literature, painting, music, theatre and photography, cinematographers use a new language in which various expressive means have become closely intertwined. From its birth in the 1880s, the cinema has been the centre of attention for film critics, culturologists, psychologists, sociologists and linguists. In linguistic science, several approaches to the study of film discourse have emerged: linguo-semiotic, linguo-cognitive, linguo-cultural and some others. Being a complex multi-semiotic formation, film discourse consists of systems of signs that form a certain hierarchy. The so-called signs of the first order join into more complex signs of the second order, which, in turn, form even more complex signs of the third order. The latter do not evolve as a combination of meanings, but develop a completely different meaning, making film discourse a non-additive formation. Researchers have different views on what should be considered the basic unit of film discourse, what sign systems are involved, how they interact and enrich each other and what effect the multi-semiotic nature of film discourse has on the viewer.

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1. Introduction

A wealth of studies of various types of discourse has accumulated in linguistics, but multi-semiotic discourse continues to be of great interest to scientists. This is primarily due to its widespread use in the media, multimedia and electronic communication, where verbal texts, free of the elements of other systems, are becoming less frequent. At the same time, polycode, multimodal and multimedia types of discourse remain the least studied. In linguistics the terms *videoverbal*, *heterogeneous*, *hybrid*, *isoverbal*, *creolised*, *paralinguistic* and others are used to refer to multi-semiotic formations. These terms imply the use of a combination of signs of two or more semiotic systems in a single semantic space and are used to describe various materials: illustrated written work, films, Internet sites and others. However, the differences in such texts are so significant that there is a need for a specification of terminology. Film discourse is a polycode formation operating several codes. It is multimodal, i.e. perceived through two sensory modalities – hearing and sight. It is also a multimedia formation: modern films do not only have a formal division into episodes, director’s commentary, alternative scenarios of individual scenes, creation stories, interviews, subtitles and translations into several languages, but also allow the viewer to independently determine the viewing strategy – when, where and how to watch a film.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Film discourse studies

Although film discourse is one of the earliest forms of media, there is still a need for a more complete practical analysis of its linguistic, semiotic and synergetic features and for a further theoretical description.

2.2. Film semiotics

Multi-semiotic and synergetic features of film discourse are studied by film semiotics – an approach in which the film is viewed as a ‘specific sign system or set of sign systems.’ Film semiotics is based on structural linguistics, poetics, ethnology and is a consistent approach to the description of linguistic, visual and other means that affect the viewer’s perception of a film.

2.3. Multi-semiotic nature of film discourse and its effect on the audience

Film discourse is an open multi-semiotic system which is more difficult to describe than any stable system, changes in which are insignificant over a long period of time. The open nature of film discourse is explained primarily by an infinite number of images (iconic signs), which form countless combinations with each other and other signs. According to Mitry (2000), images do not always have explicit meanings, and their role is not limited to expressing one and the same meaning every time. In addition, the openness of film discourse is connected with its multimedia character (which allows the viewer to individually determine the strategy of perception) and with the operation of many codes (only partially the same for the author and the viewer or for different viewers), which eventually leads to a variability of understanding of a film and the emergence of new meanings, associations and symbols.

3. Research Questions

- What makes film discourse different from other types of discourse in the semiosphere of culture?
- What semiotic and synergetic features does film discourse have? How can they be best observed and described?
- How can film discourse be defined in terms of semiotics and synergetics?
- How does the multi-semiotic nature of film discourse affect the viewer's perception of a film?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to make a brief review of how researchers attempt to analyse the multi-semiotic nature of film discourse, the terms they apply and the kinds of semiotic signs and film units they distinguish. An overall description of the semiotic and synergetic characteristics of film discourse will help to understand why films are such a powerful tool of media communication; a form or art which is often ambiguous and open to interpretation.

5. Research Methods

The fundamental works of Ch. Pierce, S. Eisenstein, Yu. Lotman and the works of contemporary scientists G. Slyshkin, V. Tarasenko, N. Olizko have become the methodological basis for this research.

- Pierce lays the foundation for semiotics by defining and describing key semiotic terms and notions, including the term *sign*. He introduced the first classification of signs based on their relationship to the object: icons, indexes and symbols (Semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Pierce, 2018).
- Lotman (Lotman & Tsivyan, 2014) shows that the space of culture into which heterogeneous semiotic systems are submerged creates conditions for a multi-layered interaction of texts (films) forming certain strata with complex internal relations.
- Tarasenko (2017) shows how situation of instability of understanding meanings that change under the influence of discourses and communicative features of situations could be best reconstructed while Olizko (2010) develops a new complex semiotic and synergetic approach to the study of discourse and its multi-semiotic features.

6. Findings

6.1. Defining film discourse

Film discourse is a sign system that appears to be the result of interaction between texts within the discourse sphere and various discourses in the semiosphere. The borders between individual texts and discourses are not rigid but changeable as texts and discourses constantly interact and affect each other. Applying the semiotic approach, film discourse can be defined as an unlimited multitude of films (or films viewed as texts) – the result of interaction between a collective author's intention, a complex set of

possible reactions from the viewer, and the film itself, all coming into close contact in the semiosphere. A film, or a film text, is a coherent integral and complete message which embodies the author's representation of some problem, expressed with the help of verbal and non-verbal signs, organised in accordance with the concept of a collective functionally differentiated author using cinematographic codes, recorded as a sequence of frames and intended to be shown on the screen for individual or collective audiovisual perception by the viewer.

6.2. Types of semiotic signs in film discourse

Film discourse is characterised by sign heterogeneity which, according to many researchers, was inherent even in the earliest silent films where captions and an oral narrative by special commentators were used (Mechkovskaya, 2017). In addition, silent films spoke with the help of gestures and facial expressions of their characters – without a verbal dialogue it was possible to express everything that is naturally expressed with the help of words. When film dialogues appeared, they did not immediately integrate with the moving image and music, and only with time did the film change so that the dialogues agreed with the other sign systems. Later, verbal means of expression began to play a significant role, and both components – verbal and visual – became equally important.

Signs of film discourse are divided into linguistic and non-linguistic. In each group, according to Pierce's classification, icons, indexes and symbols are distinguished. Language means are mainly represented by signs and symbols that are either written (captions and inscriptions that are part of the film's reality – a poster, a street name, a letter) and oral (voiced speech of actors, off-screen text, a song) (Slyshkin & Efremova, 2004). Indexes and iconic signs are few in a language; both types, however, are used in film discourse – intonation, interjections and shifters are all examples of indexes in a natural language while onomatopoeia is iconic (Mechkovskaya, 2017).

The non-linguistic component of film discourse is to a large extent represented by iconic and index signs which can be both visual and audial. The audial part (natural noises, technical noise and music), as well as episodes of documentary films inside a feature film, are index signs. The visual part (the images of people, animals and objects that perform sequences of movements, gestures, facial expressions) consists mainly of iconic and index signs (Slyshkin & Efremova, 2004). It is important to mention that some images in a film act as signs and symbols as they have acquired a symbolic meaning during the development of cinematography (for example, the calendar is the symbol of time). Barth (2015), Mitry (2000), Pasolini (1984) and other film theorists describe symbolic images in the cinematographic language.

6.3. Types of film units in film discourse

Film discourse is a vivid example of synthesis of different types of signs in a common semantic, functional and structural sphere. The combination of simple signs produces complex signs of the first order which, in turn, form even more complicated signs of the second order (Mechkovskaya, 2017). An important semiotic feature of film discourse is that its signs are non-additive. In other words, a complex sign is not a mere sum of its components, but a qualitatively new unit. The question is what exactly should be considered a complex sign with an explicit independent meaning. Shklovsky (2017) in his works on cinematography writes about *film words* – meaningful units (actions, movements, images). A

film word is a segment of photographic material that expresses a particular meaning. The author also uses the term *hieroglyph*: hieroglyphs denote not only individual sounds, morphemes, syllables or words, but also notions. People moving on the screen are similar to hieroglyphs, film words or film notions.

Many researchers agree that the frame is the main film unit with an independent meaning. In film theory, the term *frame* is used to refer to a mini-photograph, a separate film segment or a part of a film containing a completed action – the so-called *film frame*. A film frame taken from the moment the camera is turned on can last from a few seconds to a few minutes and, therefore, has different duration. Eisenstein (2016) writes that a film is made up of film frames joined together in the process of editing. Each film frame should convey some element of the general theme. Lotman compares film frames and words: despite the fact that both can be divided into smaller parts or can form sequences – a sequence of frames and a sentence respectively, yet the film frame is the main unit. It can be accurately described and operated on in a variety of ways (Lotman & Tsivyan, 2014).

Tsivyan believes that the smallest film unit is always a pair of nuclear film frames, the so-called *basic chain*, or syntagma. A nuclear film frame is a continuous segment of a film with at least two elements: the subject of filming and its location. The message can only be understood through joining at least two such frames (Lotman & Tsivyan, 2014). Pasolini (1984) uses the term *image-sign* while Deleuze (2016) speaks about *image-movement* as the first dimension of film semiotic structure from which *image-perception*, *image-emotion*, *image-impulse*, *image-action*, *image-reflection* derive. Eco (2016) writes about *the iconic sign* as the basic unit of film structure. According to Eco, an object representing reality cannot be considered an independent sign since objects in the film frame often acquire meaning only because of the viewer's expectation to see something particular. This expectation accumulates in the course of the narration and the viewer recognises the object in a film frame, which otherwise would not be possible.

6.4. Semiotic systems and codes in film discourse

In the process of film perception, the information transmitted by different semiotic systems is being decoded and the meaning becomes clear. In her study, Donskaya (2007) identifies fourteen semiotic systems which compound to the multi-semiotic structure of media discourse. Three of them are linguistic: oral speech, written text and letter tactics; the others are non-linguistic: colour, film frame division, dance, kinesics, statics, facial expression, music, singing, sound effects, costume, appearance and the state of characters / phenomena / objects. Each semiotic system operates its own signs and rules of their combination – codes. There are also codes that work between semiotic systems to join them to express a particular meaning. Due to multiple codes interacting in film discourse, signs of different levels acquire special connections, develop a special connotative and / or symbolic meaning. Film discourse may acquire unexpected implicit meaning, which is not received directly, but by building close and distant logical and semantic links, often going beyond the boundaries of film discourse in the semiosphere of culture (Zaichenko, 2017). The code is the key with which the viewer can understand where exactly he should be looking for the meaning of an image or which links are essential at some point. Cinematographic codes include editing, angle, framing, light, plot and artistic space and some others (Slyshkin & Efremova, 2004). They are the director's language with the help of which he talks to the audience.

6.5. Film discourse functions

Film discourse can also be described in terms of the functions that it performs. These functions include sharing relevant information with the audience, passing over past experience, participation in the production of new knowledge, regulatory function, emotive function, aesthetic function and, to a lesser extent, metalinguistic and phatic functions (Mechkovskaya, 2017). Its aesthetic function is probably the most significant, and it is associated with the attention to the message for the sake of the message itself. In other words, the form of the message is more important than the meaning it conveys. The aesthetic moment is manifested in the emotional and sensual evaluation of the message from the point of view of its beauty. In written language, this is manifested in the fact that we notice the texture of the text: a single word, a collocation or a phrase attract our attention and we begin to admire its accuracy, penetration into the essence of things or its beauty. The aesthetic function of a language is most noticeable in literary works when a word is used in a new unexpected way or appears in an unusual surrounding. However, we receive more complex aesthetic experiences not from single signs and units, but when we perceive complex signs and sign combinations in works such as films or paintings.

7. Conclusion

This article therefore shows that film discourse has a number of semiotic features which make it different from many other kinds of discourse. Its most significant semiotic properties are: sign heterogeneity (signs and codes of different semiotic systems interact and create unique meanings); multi-layered structure (simple signs join into complex signs); non-additive nature (complex signs do not merely express the meaning of their components, but develop qualitatively new meanings); openness (film discourse interacts with the environment, it is constantly changing and developing); multi-channel perception (information is transmitted through two channels, sight and hearing); interactivity (it can change its structure depending on the actions of the viewer but at the same time always maintains its integrity and completeness).

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