

Matter-Reality in Cinema: Realism, Counter-Realism and the Avant-Gardes

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The present text investigates the dialectics of reality and materiality in cinema theory and practice. It attempts an epistemological and meta-semiotic approach. Based on Louis Hjelmslev's model of sign-function, it reformulates both the haunting of cinema by reality and the avant-gardes' focus on materiality as problematising the relation of cinematic semiosis to the exo-semiotic¹ realm. It starts by laying down the philosophical background of the issues investigated. It then explores the epistemological and ethico-political parameters of the debate over aesthetic realism. Finally, it discusses avant-garde cinema's techniques of drawing attention to the expression-plane, attempting their provisional systematisation. It suggests that avant-garde interest in materiality constitutes a stance against the ideology of realism, proposing an alternative relation to reality.

Reality and materiality

Each effort to tackle the subject of cinematic semiosis rests on two premises which, while going-without-saying in the context of semiotics, were not so in the history of human thought; namely that, firstly, words are signs and that, secondly, cultural products and practices are meaningful and can be studied in a way somewhat similar to the studying of words. This is the reason that in our study converse different lineages of philosophical investigation: i.e., theories about (a) language, (b) the sign, and (c) art. That said, one observes that all these different problematics always rely on a more "fundamental" level of expressed or latent ontological positions, which re-unites them as offspring of the same philosophical tradition.

Theories of language, signification and art always involve and presuppose premises with regard to, on the one hand, our relation to reality and, on the other, the question of materiality, even if these remain unacknowledged. They often

1. "Exo-semiotic" means "outside of the semiotic". For the exact use of the term "exo-semiotic", as well as for the full analysis of the semiotic model on which this text is based, see Walldén, "Reaching Toward the Outside: Saussure, Hjelmslev and Cinema Semiotics", in the present volume.

demonstrate a certain dualism, expressed in couples of terms such as *signifier/signified*, *form/content*, *expression/content*, *substance/form*. Even when our science and academic philosophies have proposed new models, the names of many terms and our layman use of them continue to carry implications from their original formation. The metaphysical properties, and particularly the difference between the elements that constitute these couples, can be traced back to the archetypal ontological models of Western thought: the Platonic division between *noumena* and *phenomena* (being and appearance), and the Aristotelian division between *morphe* and *hyle* (form and matter).² Immanuel Kant's combination of the two is the source of the most widespread ontological model that the Enlightenment has bequeathed to our thought³ (fig. 1).

PLATO		ARISTOTLE	
NOUMENA	PHENOMENA	MORPHE	HYLE
Thoughts-Beings	Appearances	Form	Matter
KANT			
NOUMENA	PHENOMENA		
Things-In-Themselves	UNDERSTANDING		INTUITION
	a posteriori (Matter) EMPIRICAL CONCEPTS	a priori (Form) PURE CONCEPTS: CATEGORIES	a priori (Form) PURE INTUITIONS: SPACE & TIME
	TRANSCENDENTAL SCHEMATA		
	IMAGINATION		

Figure 1. Ontological models: Plato, Aristotle, Kant.

A first cluster of philosophical issues regards our (the subject's) relation to reality. While obviously depending on what and how reality is, our relation to it is first and foremost a question of epistemology. The accurate knowledge of reality as *adequatio*, i.e. 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 charge on the subject to learn the truth, 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, before these two meet again in the lin-

2. When the work listed is not in English, the translation of citations is mine.

3. See also Walldén, "In Between and Outside: Deconstruction and the Epistemological Limits of Semiotics".

guistic turn of the 20th century. Definitions of language and the arts *as* representations have been 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*, where Cratylus and Hermogenes argue the respective positions. 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.⁴

A second cluster of issues regards the question of materiality and the medium, which intimately concern the definition of both art and 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: i.e. 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 the work by Jacques Derrida, especially *De la grammatologie*). 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 but 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 thing, it no longer conceived signification as representation, emptying out 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 demarcation 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.

4. Of course, art as we understand it today is a very recent invention, rooted in Kantian philosophy even after its radical re-conceptualization by 20th-century art practice and theory. However, pre-modern theorizing regarding particular arts, such as Aristotle's *Poetics* or Plato's contempt for painters and fear of poets in the *Republic*, can be studied in retrospect as philosophy of art.

Finally, one should note that, while ontologically monist, semiotic theory has kept an epistemic dualism between the semiotic subject and the world, which resonates in most semiotic models and in the misleading familiar terminology.

Particularly useful, with regard to the multiple articulations of signification to what is outside it, is Hjelmslev's model of the sign-function as described in his 1954 essay "La stratification du langage" (see Walldén, "Reaching Toward the Outside") (fig. 2).

	CONTENT		EXPRESSION	
	(Signified) content-form		(Signifier) expression-form	<i>sign-function articulations</i> FORM
SEMIOTIC	content-substance 1		expression-substance 1	SUBSTANCE Level 1 <i>social perceptions</i>
EXO-SEMIOTIC	content-substance 2		expression-substance 2	Level 2 <i>socio-biological</i>
	content-substance 3		expression-substance 3	Level 3 <i>physical</i>

Figure 2. Hjelmslev's stratification and the inner structure of substance.

The sign-function can be construed as a *form* bridging two *substances*. All parts of the sign-function are *real*, as no ontological dualism underlies the epistemological dualism of this model. There are two directions of the sign's relation toward the *exo-semiotic* reality, which are also its connections to *materiality*: through the content-plane and through the expression-plane. Traditionally, what was often meant by a sign's relation to reality was its relation to the *referent*, i.e., to level 3 of the content-substance; while discussions regarding the materiality in art or language usually concerned the entire expression-plane (fig. 3).

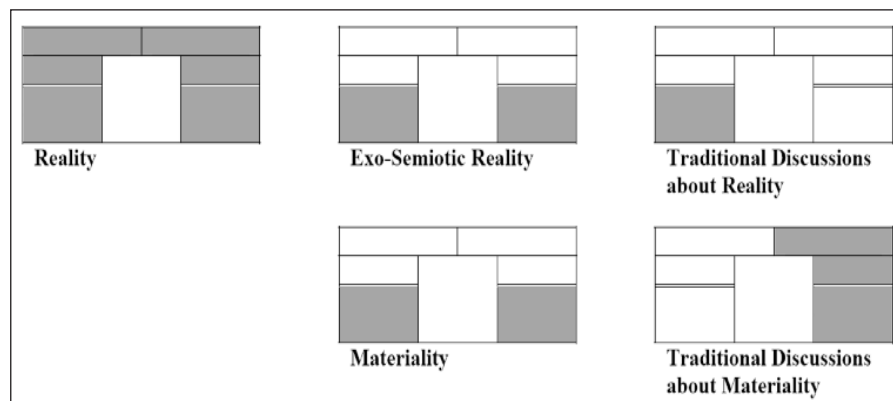


Figure 3. Reality, materiality and Hjelmslev's stratification.

Born about the same time as semiotics, the novelty of the moving image was often invested with metaphysical attributes – from excessive reality to illusionality, from immediacy to universality. On the one hand, it was often compared with other forms of expression in order to gain legitimacy as an art; on the other, it needed to defend its specificity. The terms of these issues were reformulated in the frame of semiotic studies.

The debate over realism in cinema

The divided birth of cinema in the Lumières-Méliès opposition already opens the question of its relation to reality. As is always the case with origins, this division has been multiply invested with meanings. Two related but opposing interpretations are: “cinema as a way to document reality” vs. “cinema as a way to create illusions”; or “cinema believing in representation” vs. “cinema revealing its constructed nature”.

The division between fiction and non-fiction films appeared quite early in the history of cinema. Fiction films were the ones that first won the battle of inclusion in the realm of art and gained the status of cinema *par excellence*, which they implicitly hold until today. The demarcation lines between fiction films and documentaries, on the one hand, and documentaries and reporting films, on the other, have been extremely difficult to draw. The reason is that there is no difference at all in the way their signification is produced. As Eva Stefani observes, “the practice of documentary and fiction filmmaking refutes any attempt to determine differences between them” (11). Possibly their most crucial difference lies in the expectations of their audiences. Documentary has had a partially independent history, characterised – as expected – by a higher degree of intensity in the posing of the question of its relation to reality. As a result, it has developed a more acute awareness of the complexities of the issue, incorporating into its codes elements that in fiction film are considered avant-garde.

World War II is the turning-point with regard to the question of cinema’s relation to reality. Francesco Casetti notes that until then the assumed closeness of this relation had impeded cinema’s inclusion among the arts; from that point on it became an argument in its favour (26). Jean Breschand explains that the war changed people’s relation toward both reality and the media. On the one hand, the dealings with the real gained in importance and urgency; on the other, the public no longer believed in the objectivity of representations (28). A close relation to reality became both more desirable and more difficult to establish.

Cinema’s (assumed) privileged relation to reality, irrespectively of whether it was judged positively or negatively, has had different foundations. First is the notion of cinema as an unmediated opening to reality, as a “window” or “mirror” or “slice of reality”. This position is easily refuted by a listing of the technical mediations and creative choices involved in a film’s construction: from the choice of what to shoot and the manipulation of the pre-filmic elements to the frame and shooting choices, from decoupage and editing to sound-design and mixing. A certain improvement of the previous notion conceives cinema as a

neutral recording of an already-coded reality, or – according to Pasolini – as a secondary writing of the language of reality. This formulation still greatly underestimates the amount of choices and the degree of manipulation this “recording” allows or, rather, necessitates, while the concept of writing as secondary is susceptible to Derridean deconstruction.

Further lines of argument are based on the bond of similarity of the iconic sign and the concept of indexicality, both of which have been convincingly refuted by Umberto Eco.⁵ One needs to deal separately with the literal indexicality of photographic technologies. André Bazin, the most prominent theorist of realism in cinema, has called this kind of indexicality “ontology of the photographic image” and compared it, in almost mystical exaltation, to the Sacred Shroud. However, this link does not connect the signified to its referent; it connects a material trace to its material conditions of production. Therefore, it does not affect the conventionality of cinematic semiosis. To give a crude example: Alexis Damianos’s *Evdokia* (1971) may be proof that the actress Maria Vasileiou has existed but it is certainly not proof of the existence of the character of Evdokia.

A final line of argument with regard to cinema’s privileged relation to reality is based on the richness of the sense stimuli that cinema provides. The argument is that the greater the range of sense stimuli an art involves, the closer it comes to our experience of reality. This argument underestimates 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 this is so. This is the famous concept of cinema’s *impression, illusion or effect of reality*, which practically means the forgetting of a film’s conventional and constructed nature. There are three groups of reasons given for this impression. The first group concerns 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 been entangled in the history of cinema theory with 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. Moreover, one of the less simple issues here is the definition of the very concept of realism.

As mentioned in the first section of the present paper, what and how reality *is* constitute metaphysical questions. Our relation to reality is the concern of epis-

5. For a presentation of Eco’s refutations, see Walldén, “Reaching Toward the Outside” in the present volume.

temology. “Realism”, in this context, has very little to do with the use of the term in art theory. 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 – i.e., 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. Kant is the most influential case of such an epistemological choice. He introduced the idea that we (humans) give form to our experience and, by projecting forms onto the world, provide the conditions of possibility for our understanding. Saussurean semiotics redoubles the Kantian epistemological structure on the level of the semiotic, carrying with it both its anti-realistic epistemology and its realistic ontology. That is why, in semiotic theory, non-semiotised matter is inaccessible to understanding.⁶

The concept of “realism” enters the arts and literature in the 19th century, and although it pre-supposes 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 artworks, 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, 290-298). In the 20th century, the advent of modernism and the avant-gardes strongly questioned both its theoretical premises and its aesthetic conventions, leading to either its complete abandonment or its total re-formulation.

Realism has had a particularly strong hold on cinema theory and criticism throughout the 20th century, partly due to cinema’s technological characteristics and partly due to the historical contingency of its late invention. While cinema theory participated, and indeed contributed radically novel arguments, in the discussions regarding modernism and the avant-gardes, yet it kept much longer a nucleus of 19th-century aesthetics. Determining factors in the conceptualization 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 was the theorisation of the Italian Neo-Realist movement. Casetti’s excellent survey (25-47) organises it around two oppositions. The first is between Cesare Zavattini’s notion of direct correspondence and Guido Aristarco’s surpassing of appearances – which refers to Lukács (and ultimately to Aristotle). The second opposition is between Bazin, who thinks that the photographic basis of cinema constitutes a participation in reality, and

6. See also Walldén, “In Between and Outside: Deconstruction and Structuralism on Semiotics and its Limits”.

Siegfried Kracauer, who thinks that it can and should provide a better documentation than our senses would allow. Casetti closes his survey with the position voiced by the journals *Cinéthique* and *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which considered aesthetic realism an idealist theory. I think that this is a valid observation.

As we have mentioned, philosophically the concepts of reality and truth are interlinked. Truthfulness in cinema has been conceptualised in different ways: as verisimilitude, immediacy or sincerity. Correspondingly, one can distinguish two groups of realistic approaches in filmmaking and a group of counter-realistic approaches, all concerned with the connection to the exo-semiotic and based on some notion of truthfulness.

The first approach has formed the so-called classic narrative cinema. This approach is based on a slippage in the significance of the concept of “similarity”. “To look like the real” because faithful to the real becomes “to look like the real” in the sense of giving the impression of being real. So truthfulness regresses in favor 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 consciousness of the construction. These conventions are socio-historically conditioned, which becomes quite obvious in the speed by which they lose their effectiveness as illusions of reality. D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which was hailed as very realistic in its time, seems awkward, even funny, to contemporary audiences; as probably Michael Mann’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) will seem 80 years from now.

A second approach to realism aspires to minimise mediation. It includes various 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 too closely the audience’s reception, using more loosely connected and open-ended narrational structures etc. However, these techniques still 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 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 a fraud, 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, on the levels of both visual representation and narration.

The focus of the avant-gardes on the expression-plane in cinema

Avant-garde cinema has shown an intensified interest in the connection to the exo-semiotic realm through the expression-plane; a choice which has been invested with political meaning.

The term “avant-garde” originates in military jargon. It was first used for the realm of ideas during the Enlightenment and spread to the field of the arts around the 19th century with the figure of the romantic artist, prophet and visionary. At 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 avant-garde art movements: (a) the “first” or “historical” avant-gardes, in the early 20th century up to the 1930s; and (b) the “second” or “neo-” avant-gardes, mainly during the 1960s and 1970s.

There are two topoi of dispute regarding the definition of the concept and the demarcation of the field of avant-garde art: on the one hand, the dialectical relation between form experimentation and politics, which are deemed as necessarily connected but in different ways and degrees; and, on the other, the relation of the avant-gardes to modernism. In any case, a definition of avant-garde art must include both the element of structural innovation at the level of the signifier, and particularly the kind of innovation which questions the established system and forges a “new language”, and the – conceptually interdependent and historically unprecedented – questioning and destabilisation of the institution of art itself. It should also be noted that avant-garde artists show a high degree of theory-awareness, which is not only embedded in but also central to their artistic practices; this is consistent with their rejection of the opposition between theory and practice.⁷

Structuralist semiotics is connected both conceptually and historically to the historical avant-gardes, while its post-structuralist mutation is closely linked to the second avant-gardes. They share their convictions regarding the interdependence between the signified and the signifier, the distinction between meaning and reference, and art as not demarcated from life.

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, 69-70). Jakobson’s poetic function, along with the Russian Formalists’ concept of *defamiliarisation*, became the basis for a new, semiotic definition of art, formed around two axes: focus on the expression-plane and innovative research, as well as their intimate connection.⁸ This was formulated through a constant two-directional interaction between semiotic theory and the avant-gardes, and acted both as a descriptive definition

7. See Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*; Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*; Per Bäckström, “One Earth, Four or Five Words: The Peripheral Concept of ‘Avant Garde’”.

8. Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique*; Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 261-276.

for the semiotic study of art and as a prescriptive definition for avant-garde art practice.

What is interesting to observe, though, is how this definition was situated with regard to art's relation to life. Traditionally, such an attention of art to its own expression-plane would be conceived as a turn of art to itself and away from the world, the clearest formulation of which would be the dictum "art for art's sake". However, the avant-gardes' focus on the expression-plane is no longer conceived as a distantiating from exo-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 exo-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.

The relation of cinema to the avant-gardes is peculiar. At the beginning of the 20th century, the recently-born cinema was governed by no classical "canon" against which it needed to rebel, a condition which was as much a source of freedom as of conservatism. On the one hand, the forefathers and classics of this new art were the representatives of the avant-garde movements, while cinema seemed to fulfil the avant-gardes' aspirations for intermediality and the lifting of boundaries between the arts. On the other, its newness and desire to be recognised as an art form led cinema to an extensive use of loan concepts and techniques from the other arts, among which representational elements already abandoned by the visual arts and narrative conventions challenged by literature. Hence, the history of avant-garde cinema is parallel but not identical to the history of the avant-garde in the other arts.

There are several definitions of avant-garde cinema, many of them offered by the filmmakers themselves. They often tend to be polemical, and therefore exclusive. My intention is rather to include than exclude. My starting point is the multiple and diverse manifold of films and filmmakers that have either defined themselves or been recognised by others as avant-garde. These include: German Expressionist, Dadaist, Surrealist, Soviet Montage, Lettrist, "art-cinema", "pure", "abstract", "metric", "structural" and "underground" films, Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Dziga Vertov, Man Ray, Maya Deren, Kurt Kren, Peter Kubelka, Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Gregory Markopoulos, Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, Agnès Varda, Marguerite Duras, Laura Mulvey, Kostas Sfikas, Antoinetta Angelidi, Maria Klonaris, Katerina Thomadaki, Thanassis Rentzis, Stavros Tornos and many others. Moreover, my approach does not normatively resolve the dispute over the dialectics between "avant-garde" and "experimental" cinema, neither does it draw a definite demarcation line between cinema and video-art or novel audio-visual technologies. Elsewhere,⁹ I have attempted such an inclusive

9. Hamalidi, Nikolopoulou and Walldén, "Mapping the Greek Avant-Garde: The Function of Transfers between Aesthetic and Political Dualisms".

definition of avant-garde cinema, by collecting the different criteria proposed by the relevant bibliography. I have grouped the definitional criteria into five categories: (a) alternative financial and technical methods of production and distribution, (b) form research, (c) political radicalism, (d) the self-awareness of the film-makers, and (e) the acknowledgment by theorists, critics and/or the general public. None of them is either necessary or sufficient.

Avant-garde cinema and cinema semiotics have had an ambivalent relationship. On the one hand, as we have seen, the Soviet Montage movement was closely connected to Russian Formalism and provided a very early application of structuralist principles in cinema practice and theory. On the other, the discipline of cinema semiotics as founded by Metz has privileged the classical narrative film. This choice was explained by Metz himself (in “Le cinéma: langue ou langage?”) as a turn toward studying cinema in its socialised use and not as a series of exceptional art-works. However, it relies on the same “logocentrism” that characterises his theory – despite his brilliant insight on the composite nature of cinematic semiosis – which leads him to a very reductive definition of how cinema produces signification and what constitutes its narration.

The struggle against the “realist” and “reductivist” misconceptions in cinema – i.e., against the beliefs that cinema can give an immediate access to reality and that it can be reduced to words – were interconnected and of central importance for the avant-gardes. 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 “photogénie”, Dulac’s “visual film”, “optical harmonies” and “music of silence”, and Eisenstein’s “hieroglyphics” (see Adams Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film*). 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 the 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 to the exo-semiotic materials and processes. By the early 1960s, the research on cinema’s specificity had evolved into a research on its conceptual and expressive borderlines, and then on the expansion of its apparatus and its opening to other fields.

Avant-garde films apply a multitude of strategies and techniques to draw attention to their expression-plane and thus to their conventional and constructed nature. The easiest strategy is to thematise them. A more intriguing strategy is to draw attention to an element by actually using it in a way that will attract attention. This may mean breaking the conventions of its usage, using it in a novel manner or intensifying its intrinsic contradictions. Finally, a particular strategy,

which pertains to the focusing on the borderline between the semiotic and exo-semiotic, is the semiotisation of exo-semiotic elements.



Figure 4. Photogram from *Idées Fixes / Dies Irae* (1977) by Antoinetta Angelidi. Cinema's multileveled heterogeneity and semiotisation of exo-semiotic substance.

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 *contrapunto*. By rearranging already codified messages and juxtaposing materials, the film comments both on the messages themselves and on the functioning of cinematic semiosis. An example of creating a dialectical meaning by juxtaposing moving photographic image, static photography, speech and letters occurs in the following shot: Two men, dressed in women's underwear and set in front of an advertisement-poster, recite fragments of political slogans and advertisements, while the words "family" and "state" are projected on their bodies. After an off-screen direction, a backward movement of the camera reveals the writing on the poster and part of the equipment (fig. 4). So we are shown the difference between filming an acting body and an already photographed body, between filming letters projected on a three-dimensional body and letters printed on a surface, between spoken words and written. We are also made aware of the existence of the director and equipment, of the movement of the camera and of the limitations of the frame.

In order to investigate further the borderline between the semiotic and exo-semiotic, we need to see what cinema's exo-semiotic expression-substance may include (fig. 5). The raw materials of cinema are, of course, moving light and shadows, as well as sound. These are registered on the material support of the film and audio track, or more recently in digital form on a hard disc. These registrations, after being formed and processed in multiple ways, reach the receivers. Thus, there is the mechanical and/or electronic equipment allowing the registra-

tion and formation of the material, and the mechanical and/or electronic equipment allowing its projection, as well as the perception apparatuses of the audience. And then, there are the mechanical, physical, chemical etc. processes of registration, printing, editing and so on. Moreover, in a different conceptual frame, one can study the praxes and events of production and reception. Finally, one has to take into account the framing of all these by economic processes, including pre-production, production, post-production and diffusion, as well as by a general socio-historical context.

Stages of the circuit of production-reception	PROCESSES technological, biological, physical, chemical	EQUIPMENT	MATERIALS
Pre-production	<i>Manipulation of the pre-filmic elements (mise-en-scène)</i> <i>Shooting (cinematography & sound recording)</i>	<i>THE CAMERA & other shooting equipment</i>	<u>LIGHT-WAVE in TIME & SOUND-WAVE</u> <i>Pre-filmic, i.e. what is in front of the camera (settings, actors etc.)</i>
PRODUCTION			<i>THE FILM ≠ DIGITAL celluloid frame & audio track</i>
Post-production	<i>Printing, editing, sound-design and mixing & other post-production processes</i>	<i>Printing, editing and other equipment</i> and / or <i>COMPUTER, PROGRAMS & equipment</i>	<i>Printing and other materials</i>
Diffusion-Distribution Reproduction	<i>Projection</i>	<i>THE PROJECTOR</i> <i>Screen, Room</i>	
RECEPTION	<i>Reception: vision & hearing</i>	<i>HUMAN SENSORIAL APPARATUS</i>	

Figure 5. Cinema's exo-semiotic expression-substance.

Let us proceed to a provisional classification of strategies and techniques used by avant-garde films to draw attention to their articulation with the exo-semiotic elements of their expression-plane (see Adams Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film*; Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*; Brenez, *Cinéma d'avant-garde*).

The notion of cinema's recording instruments as generating their own subject-matter appears already with the first 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 movements. For example, the 1967 film *Wavelength* develops in a continuous 45-minute zoom, while in the 1971 film *La Région Centrale* the camera moves around 360 degrees in every direction and on every plane of a sphere. Another group of strategies aim 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 on 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, 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, refilming, recopying. 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 selected by a cinema sign-function.

Editing as both a 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 shot to the level of 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 *Cinéma Anémic* and includes Kubelka's, Conrad's and Sharits' "flicker-films".

Experimenting with 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, i.e., 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 numerically. Another strategy completely subtracts the film from the process of projection. This was first thought 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 I*, he interrupts the beam of pure color 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 sale 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 exo-semiotic are the material conditions, economic and working relations, and institutions that surround the processes of production and diffusion of 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 their films is as important as the result.

Closing, one could make a few observations. Firstly, the strategy of semiotising exo-semiotic elements of the expression-substance is particularly intriguing, precisely because the moment they are semiotised, they cease to be exo-semiotic, moving on the borderline against a further exo-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 a series of co-existing frames. This is not necessarily a problem but it means that such a work includes on equal footing two different uses of the same material (i.e., its selection by different forms, which belong to different sign-functions, one cinematic, the other not) together with a verbal explanation. Thirdly, these techniques play with and often cross the borderlines of cinema semiosis toward other kinds of semiosis, precisely because the kinds of semiosis are not defined by the 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 potentialities; potentialities with regard both to filmmaking practice and to the understanding of films, cinema and signification in general.

Conclusions

This text construes the complicated dialectics of reality and materiality in cinema as pertaining to the articulation between the semiotic and the exo-semiotic realms.

It starts by laying down the philosophical background of the issues investigated, showing how they are rooted in the ontological models of classical metaphysics and the related concept of representation. In this context Saussure's definition of the sign, together with its formalisation by Hjelmslev, constitute a radical emptying of the metaphysical properties of signification, which affects its relations to reality and materiality. The sign-function is described as a form reaching toward the exo-semiotic through two directions: its content-substance and its expression-substance.

In its second section, having historicised the question of cinema's relation to reality, the text examines the arguments supporting the proposition that such a relation is privileged in comparison to other kinds of semioses; then, it surveys the different ideologies of realism; and finally, it proposes an interpretational classification of filmmaking choices with regard to realism. It observes that while realism in cinema is theoretically formulated as a question of reference or extension, it actually is a question pertaining mostly to cinema's expression-plane. Moreover, it shows that both the motivation and the underlying structure of the positions regarding cinema's relation to reality are ethical and political. We are led to formulate a kind of politics of the expression-plane.

The third section of the text investigates the intersection of semiotics and the avant-garde on the subject of the characteristics and potentialities of cinematic semiosis. It shows how the avant-gardes' focus on the expression-plane is a strategy to dissolve the "realist" and "reductivist" misconceptions, and how this focus has shifted from investigating cinema's specificities to exploring and expanding its borderlines. The text closes by surveying several of avant-garde cinema's strategies and techniques that draw attention to the exo-semiotic expression-substance.

Our use of semiotic concepts and models has offered us the ability to clarify issues that have tormented the theory of cinema since its birth. We have demonstrated the fact that cinematic semiosis is mediated, as well as some of the possible localities of manipulations of an audiovisual message. We have also shown the interconnection between aesthetic and ethico-political choices. Moreover, we have proposed an interpretative approach both to the ideologies of realism and to some aspects of the phenomenon of the avant-gardes. Most importantly, by our study of cinematic semiosis, we have enriched our understanding of the function of semiosis in general.

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