

Language and Cinema: Film Language in *Sabotage*

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This paper comes out of my longstanding interest in the process of adapting literary texts to film, and I have been particularly intrigued in the question posed by the film theorist Dudley Andrew: “how is it possible to transform the signifiers of one material (verbal) to signifiers of another material (images and sounds)?”¹ There have been a number of attempts to answer this question throughout the short history of cinema, most of them starting from the assumption that film has its own language, which can be defined and analysed in the same ways as spoken and written language.

The first systematic attempt to define the language of film was Sergei Eisenstein’s theory of montage which is concerned with the way in which the individual shots of a film are combined into larger units - first the scene, then the sequence, finally the complete film. The idea, derived initially from the films of D.W. Griffith in the early years of the century, was developed and refined by the Russian filmmakers of the 1920s, particularly Eisenstein. He poured scorn on the idea that shots should be combined as though they were links in a chain or mere building blocks. True montage, he declared, did not depend on the *accretion* of shots, but on the *collision* or conflict between them.²

In his theoretical essays Eisenstein outlines a number of processes by which the filmmaker can achieve such a collision or conflict. By far the most important is “montage by attraction,” which is the one most commonly associated with early Russian cinema. Montage by attraction works through metaphor or metonymy in such a way that the meaning of one image is not only *reinforced* by its juxtaposition with another, it *derives* from it. One of the most celebrated examples of this is the Odessa steps scene in Eisenstein’s 1925 film, *Potemkin* - a scene which is familiar to most people, even if they have not seen the film itself. Shots of a body of soldiers marching down the steps at Odessa harbour are intercut with shots of the crowd which has been assisting the mutineers. One young woman falls and the pram which she has been holding rolls down the steps. Repeated shots of the pram are intercut with close-ups of the faces of the crowd and the feet of the descending soldiers. From the collision between these images,

Eisenstein claims, the audience derives a new concept: an awareness of power and powerlessness.

For Eisenstein, then, it was montage that converted mere animated photography into a great new art form. What is more, because shot and montage are for Eisenstein the basic elements of cinematic language he sees them as analysable in linguistic terms - he talks about “film diction” which as yet lacks “its classic models” (115), refers to the *syntax* of montage and the *orthography* of film and so on.³ But montage of the kind the Russians advocated did not adapt well to the coming of synchronized sound. Although it is now generally agreed that silent films were never really silent, the various commentaries, sound effects or music accompanying them had been asynchronous. Montage depended on creating its own rhythms, on establishing what Eisenstein called “verbal counterpoint” - and he sees the Odessa steps sequence in *Potemkin* as an example of this. In 1928, Eisenstein together with other Russian filmmakers issued a Statement declaring that synchronized sound was a two-edged invention because although it provided a new resource, it would not only destroy the language of cinema - visual montage - it would also deprive the world of an *international* language. This was a fear expressed by a number of writers across the world in the late twenties and thirties. In 1929, for instance, the film critic Cedric Belfrage wrote:

After seeing “The Jazz Singer”, I went home feeling very sad, really. And I made my contribution by predicting that the talkies wouldn’t last very long. The thing that made me so sad was that the international language was over. This was really a thing which nobody seemed to notice very much, but after all, the human species had lived on the face of the globe for thousands of years and there had never before been a language in which they could all speak to each other. It had been one of the great causes of all the wars and all the division that had taken place - and here we finally come to a language which could be shown, everywhere, and which everyone could understand, and we still feel sad about it. The advent of the talkies introduced another dimension to film language.⁴

In Andre Bazin’s *What is Cinema?*, one of the most important contributions to film theory in the 1950s and ‘60s, there is an attempt to reconcile Eisenstein’s approach with the sound film. Bazin acknowledges that montage as it was used in the silent film is incompatible with synchronized sound, but challenges Eisenstein’s contention that

film language and montage are one and the same thing: “The cinema that is believed to have died of the sound track is in no sense ‘*the* cinema’” he asserts.⁵ He suggests that some of the best films of the 1940s combined the techniques of montage - which entailed composing with the camera - with the practice of staging an action in front of it, a method he characterises as *mise-en-scene*. This way of filming, he claims, particularly the depth of focus shots promoted by Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane*, created a more extended film language and a new kind of realism, a mode which gives spectators more scope for formulating their own interpretations.

Like most other writers on film, Bazin takes it for granted that the language of cinema *does* correspond to verbal language, but in the 1970s this assumption was challenged resoundingly by the French Structuralist film theorist Christian Metz. Using Ferdinand de Saussure’s terms he argues that although film can be said to have its own *langage*, it does not have its own langue: “cinema,” he claims, “is a language without a system”.⁶ He bases his argument on Andre Martinet’s claim that one cannot talk of language except where there is “double articulation” - a second articulation which divides up the sound continuum of a language in a semantically arbitrary way and a first articulation which combines these phonemes to produce units of meaning. Eisenstein had argued that the individual shot, which he describes as “A single piece of celluloid. A tiny rectangular frame in which there is, organized in some way, a piece of an event”, is a kind of phoneme⁷ and it is only when shots are combined together by montage that meaning is produced. For Metz, on the other hand, the shot cannot be seen as a phoneme because it is already a complex unit.⁸ Eisenstein, he claims, had fallen into a common error which is very tempting – “Film is too obviously a message,” he suggests, “for one not to assume that it is coded”⁹ - nonetheless, he maintains, “There is nothing in the cinema that corresponds, even metaphorically, to the second articulation”.¹⁰

What is more, there is nothing in cinema, according to Metz, that corresponds to a first articulation at the level of the word. Attempts to establish a syntax of film, he asserts, usually identify the image as a word and the sequence as a sentence, but the image in a film always corresponds to one or more sentences, and the sequence is a complex segment of discourse. This means that because the image is always actualized, even a

shot that might, because of its content, *appear* to correspond to a word, is still a sentence: “A close-up of a revolver does not mean ‘revolver’ (a purely lexical unit), but in the very least and without speaking of the connotations, it signifies ‘Here is a revolver’”.¹¹ This means that montage is not an articulation in the linguistic sense because “Even the most partial and fragmentary ‘shot’ (what film people call the close-up) still presents a complete segment of reality. The close-up is only a shot taken closer than other shots.”¹²

For Metz, then, the signifying processes of film constitute a mode of discourse which must be distinguished from those of verbal languages and his goal is to establish a semiotics of cinema - pointing out that “semiotics can and must depend heavily on linguistics but it must not be confused with linguistics”¹³ and some of the most recent work in film language seeks to avoid linguistics altogether. Contemporary American theorists, for instance, have turned to from linguistics to cognitive psychology as a method for the analysis of cinematic images.¹⁴ But it could be argued that the relationship between moving pictures and language has always been a problematic one. In the silent period there was considerable debate over whether or not the silent film could do without written language altogether, and in 1920 a writer in the *Bioscope* asks “When is a motion picture not a picture?” and answers, “when it is a collection of sub-titles”. “The only perfect picture will come,” he adds, “when directors learn to tell their story so vividly that the sub-titles won’t be needed to explain the plot.”¹⁵ Even today, in fact, film scholars and critics tend to assess the quality of silent films by reference to length and quantity of sub-titles - the fewer the titles the better the film.

There has, then, always been a groundswell of opinion that the best films are those which tell their story visually, with the minimum of words, and director Alfred Hitchcock was certainly of that opinion. His aim, he maintains, is to produce “pure cinema”¹⁶ where it is the visual images that tell the story. In this paper I want to explore the way in which film images relate to literary discourse through an analysis of a scene from one of Hitchcock’s early films, *Sabotage*. This was an adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s novel *The Secret Agent*, made for British Gaumont in 1936.¹⁷ At first viewing, admittedly, this film seems too unlike the book to be acceptable as an adaptation. Both texts deal with anarchist activity in London, but whilst Conrad’s novel, written in 1907, is set in the

1880s, Hitchcock's film updates the story to 1936. Despite the changes, there are interesting parallels. The novel was written and published in the decade before the First World War, the film was made and released in the decade leading up to the second - both periods of international tension and fears of subversion. It could be argued, too, that Verloc's "front" as a secret agent - a shop containing pornographic books and pictures, which leads through to the parlour and living quarters - has ironic connections with the screen - Verloc's trade as proprietor of a flea-pit cinema in a working class area; in the film as in the book it's literally a front - everyone has to walk through the cinema to get to the house. Could it be that both Conrad and Hitchcock see Verloc as "the seller of shady wares"?¹⁸ The greengrocer in *Sabotage* takes it for granted that the detective has been watching Verloc for this very reason. He nudges him and says, "You must have been showing some funny sort of films, I dare say. Perhaps a bit too hot?"

It could be argued, therefore, that Hitchcock's radical changes in place and setting, even the changes to plot and characterisation, do not necessarily detract from the worth or interest of *Sabotage* as an adaptation of the novel, but can this claim be extended to the discourse of the film, the way in which it depicts the story? In *The Secret Agent* our view of events is very much coloured by the omniscient narrator's ironic commentary - something Conrad himself discovered when he later rewrote his story as a play. In a Note to the 1920 edition of *The Secret Agent*, Conrad suggests that it was the narration itself, the ironic overtones of the narrator's commentary, which had made the story acceptable for the reader. "Lately," he writes, "circumstances ... have compelled me to strip this tale of the literary robe of indignant scorn it has cost me so much to fit on it decently, years ago. I have been forced, so to speak, to look upon its bare bones. I confess it makes a grisly skeleton."¹⁹ Although there is no narratorial voice-over in *Sabotage*, the film does introduce irony at key moments. It is, for instance, because Verloc's initial act of anarchism, the shutting down of the electricity PowerStation, has the opposite effect from the one that was intended - far from alarming Londoners it makes them laugh - that the whole tragic train of events is set in motion. There is irony too in the scene of Verloc's death - the climax of the film as it is of the novel - because in both texts it results from his complete inability to understand the intensity of his wife's feelings about her brother.²⁰

What is striking about the overall effect of this scene in the film is the extent to which it replicates the effects achieved by Conrad's account of Verloc's death. Again, at first glance there seems to be little similarity. In the film Mr and Mrs Verloc are shown at dinner, in a scene which replicates the happy family meal shown at the beginning of the film when Stevie was present. The camera cuts from close-ups and extreme close-ups of the two protagonists facing one another across the table, and these are interwoven with shots of the empty place, and extreme close-ups of the meat knife in front of Winnie Verloc:²¹ as Hitchcock comments, "The tension between the two is built up with the knife as its focus."²² Conrad's husband and wife, on the other hand, are not facing one another and the ham and knife are on a side table. Not only is Verloc not looking at his wife, he is slumped on the sofa, "lying on his back and staring upwards".²³ Winnie is leaning on the mantelpiece behind him: "The head and shoulders of Mr Verloc were hidden from her by the high side of the sofa. She kept her eyes fixed on his feet". Nonetheless, despite these obvious contrasts, I would suggest that the overall meanings conveyed by the sequence of images in the film and the language, of the fictional text are very similar and, what is more, that they lead the reader/spectator to draw the same conclusions. One of these is that Mrs Verloc cannot be held responsible for her actions. Both film and novel convey this before, during and after the passage/scene under consideration, by showing us a changed character - once she knows about the nature of Stevie's death, the novel's Mrs Verloc does not speak, and the lively, talkative woman in *Sabotage* turns into a silent automaton who seems scarcely aware of her surroundings.

The section in *The Secret Agent* which describes Verloc's death is marked by a change of style. Throughout the novel up to this point, an impersonal, third person narrator's commentary has told us not only about the characters' actions, but also what they are thinking and feeling. In this passage, however, there is an abrupt change from internal to external focalization: we see only what would be apparent to an impersonal, detached observer. Not only are we told nothing about what is going on in Mrs Verloc's mind, we are not even told that she picks up the knife, only that as she moves towards her husband, "Her right hand skimmed slightly the end of the table, and when she had passed on towards the sofa the carving knife had vanished without the slightest sound from the side of the dish". Similarly, the narrator does not tell us that Mrs Verloc plunges the knife into her husband; in the crucial sentence there is a move from the active to the passive voice

so that agency need not be ascribed: "The knife was already planted in his breast". Similarly, we do not see Winnie Verloc stab her husband in Hitchcock's film. After he moves around the table towards her we see them in medium close-up, standing close together, then the camera glides up to a close-up of their heads and shoulders so that we can no longer see Winnie's hand holding the knife. There is no way of knowing whether she stabs her husband deliberately or whether it happens accidentally as he moves towards her.

There are interesting resemblances, too, in the pace of these passages. The whole scene in *Sabotage* appears to move very slowly. This is partly because the sequence is almost silent - Winnie says nothing at all and her husband has only three brief utterances, there is no background music or external noise - and partly because the length of the individual shots gives an effect almost of slow-motion. As Hitchcock points out, the camera, by moving closer and closer to the protagonists draws us more and more into the action.²⁴ In the corresponding passage in the novel Conrad produces very much the same effect by very different means. Mr Verloc, lying on his back on the sofa sees "partly on the ceiling and partly on the wall the moving shadow of an arm with a clenched hand holding a carving knife. It flickered up and down. Its movements were leisurely. They were leisurely enough for Mr Verloc to recognize the limb and the weapon." This phrase - "They were leisurely enough..." is repeated three more times at the beginning of the next three sentences, which describe the Mr Verloc's reassessment of the situation and his plans to circumvent its outcome, culminating in: "But they were not leisurely enough to allow Mr Verloc the time to move either hand or foot. The knife was already planted in his breast". What is being described here is clearly a very rapid series of actions which, in the book as in the film have been carefully prepared for - Mrs Verloc picks up the carving knife and stabs her husband - but the form of expression creates a cinematic effect of slow-motion.

What is interesting about the *Sabotage* scene is that although it gives an effect of slow-motion, this is only an effect; the camera speed does not change, although this is, of course a device available to the filmmaker. In the novel the same illusion is achieved,

by necessarily different means. The narratologist, Gerard Genette, sets out a schema for analysing what he calls narrative duration - the relation between the amount of time occupied by the discourse of the text and the amount of time covered by the events of the story.²⁵ In theory, he suggests, there is a continuous gradation from the infinite speed of ellipsis (where the discourse is nonexistent but the story is continuing) to the absolute slowness of the descriptive pause (where the action of the story has stopped although the discourse continues). Genette outlines two intermediary positions: the summary, where discourse time is very much shorter than story time and the scene (dialogue passages) where discourse time equals story time. He acknowledges that his schema is asymmetric because it does not provide any form symmetrical to the summary although it is possible to conceive of a passage in which acts or events are told about more slowly than they were performed or undergone: "This," he suggests, "would obviously be a sort of scene in slow motion," and he concedes that "The thing is undoubtedly feasible as a deliberate experiment...".²⁶ In the passage and scene I have analysed, both Conrad and Hitchcock have experimented with this technique with considerable success. It may be true, as Alfred Hitchcock assured Francois Truffaut that he read a novel only once and then forgot about it in order to "create cinema" but in *Sabotage*, despite enormous changes to characterization, plot and setting of *The Secret Agent*, he seems to have remembered, or at any rate reproduced in screen images the effects achieved by the language of the novel.

It seems as though it is possible to find away of reproducing the language of literary narrative in film, to "transform the signifiers of one material (verbal) to signifiers of another material (images and sounds)" although the modes of expression cannot be equated in any straightforward way.

Notes.

1 Dudley Andrew *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.101.

2 Sergei Eisenstein, "Film Language," *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1963, *rp.* 108- 121).

3 Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematic principle and the Ideogram," *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1963) p. 37.

- 4 Cedric Belfrage, qtd in Kevin Brownlow's *Hollywood: The Pioneers* (London: Book Club Associates, 1979), p.266.
- 5 Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?* vol. I (London: University of California Press, 1972), p. 28.
- 6 Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 65.
- 7 In the essay from which I have quoted, "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form", written in the 1930s, Eisenstein describes the individual shot as "a montage cell (or molecule)". *Film Form*, p. 53.
- 8 Christian Metz, *Film Language*, p. 106.
- 9 Christian Metz, *Film Language*, p. 40.
- 10 Christian Metz, *Film Language*, p. 61.
- 11 Christian Metz, *Film Language*, p. 67. This view is questioned in Edward Branigan's article, "Here is a Picture of No Revolver!: The Negation of Images and Methods for Analysing the Structure of Pictorial Statements." *WideAngle* 8 (1986): 8-17.
- 12 Christian Metz, *Film Language*, p. 115.
- 13 Christian Metz, *Film Language*, p. 40n. Umberto Eco develops a similar argument in "On the Contribution of Film to Semiotics." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Geraid Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy. 3rd ed Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.
- 14 See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge, 1995 and Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, London: Routledge, 1992.
- 15 *Bioscope*, January 15, 1920 p.23.
- 16 Alfred Hitchcock, "On Direction," *Footnotes to The Film*, ed. Charles Davy, London: Lovat Dickson, 1938), p.7
- 17 Hitchcock was unable to use Conrad's title because he had already used it for a film based on Somerset Maugham's espionage stories which he had directed for Gaumont the previous year .
- 18 Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p.15.
- 19 Author's note to the 1920 edition of *The Secret Agent*, reprinted in many later editions. The play, which was performed at the Ambassadors' Theatre in November 1922, was not a success and closed after eight performances.
- 20 It is interesting that Hitchcock calls this episode "the best scene in *Sabotage*" and uses it again and again to demonstrate how it is the director's use of the camera rather than the acting which creates meaning in these shots: "Thanks to the camera," he claims, "the audience is now actually living' the scene". Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), pp. 146, 152).
- 21 In the novel Mrs Verloc is not given a first name. In the film she is called Winnie.
- 22 Alfred Hitchcock, "On Direction," *Footnotes to The Film*, ed. Charles Davy, p.8.
- 23 Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, p. 212. All references from the novel from now one are taken from pp. 211-212.
- 24 Hitchcock points to the extreme-close-up of Verloc as he rises to his feet and gets closer and closer to the camera: "Instinctively," says Hitchcock, "the viewer should be pushing back slightly to in his seat to allow Verloc to pass by" Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, p. 152.

25 Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp.86-112.

26 Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 95. He explains that he has not included this mode because he is concerned only with “canonical forms”.

27 Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, p. 84.

The Secret Agent Passage

Mr Verloc has returned home exhausted after he has failed in his attempt to blow up Greenwich Observatory. His wife has just learned from the police that the body of her adored brother, Stevie, who was carrying the bomb had been blown apart by the explosion.

“Come here,” he said in a peculiar tone, which might have been the tone of brutality, but was intimately known to Mrs Verloc as the note of wooing.

She started forward at once, as if she were still a loyal woman bound to that man by an unbroken contract. Her right hand skimmed slightly the end of the table, and when she had passed on towards the sofa the carving knife had vanished without the slightest sound from the side of the dish. Mr Verloc heard the creaky plank in the floor, and was content. He waited. Mrs Verloc was coming. As if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian, and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes. But Mr Verloc did not see that. He was lying on his back and staring upwards. He saw partly on the ceiling and partly on the wall the moving shadow of an arm with a clenched hand holding a carving knife. It flickered up and down. Its movements were leisurely. They were leisurely enough for Mr Verloc to recognize the limb and the weapon.

They were leisurely enough for him to take in the full meaning of the portent, and to taste the flavour of death rising in his gorge. His wife had gone raving mad -murdering mad. They were leisurely enough for the first paralysing effect of this discovery to pass away before a resolute determination to come out victorious from the ghastly struggle with that armed lunatic. They were leisurely enough for Mr Verloc to elaborate a plan of defence involving a dash behind the table, and the felling of the woman to the r' ground with a heavy wooden chair. But they were not leisurely enough to allow Mr Verloc the time to move either hand or foot. The knife was already planted in his breast. It met no resistance on its way. Hazard has such accuracies. Into that plunging . blow, delivered over the side of the couch, Mrs Verloc had put all the inheritance of her immemorial and obscure descent, the simple ferocity of the age of cavern, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms, Mr Verloc, the Secret Agent, turning slightly on his side with the force of the blow, expired without stirring a limb, in the muttered sound of the word “Don't” by way of protest.

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) pp. 212- 213.