



Elements
of film
language
grammar

April 1

2015

Can we think about movies – storytelling with pictures – in
the same way as we think about self-presentation?

Being
subjective

Elements of film language grammar

INTRO

Being subjective – here and now in the context of the IDentifEYE project I'm writing... WHO is writing? Beata Staszyńska. WHEN? March 2015. WHERE? Gdańsk, Poland, with access to the Internet – wifi – connection speed 100.0 Mb/s. WHY? To share my „own fragments” of the views and reflections I have on the practical meaning of the film maker's craft. WHAT? IDentifEYE – a cognitive concept – workshop – experiments – studies – projects – created together with Onno Hansen. HOW? For five years now I use my movie director's - documentary - workshop in education to seek new educational tools – didactics and methods that will be able to keep up with how the evolution of technology changes us and our behaviour towards others and towards situations. And that's what interests me – how people behave and how they are interpreted when they make decisions regarding their self-presentation.

Can we think about movies – storytelling with pictures – in the same way as we think about self-presentation? For the purpose of this article I assume yes. We have a hero in a movie – sometimes it is a collective hero. Can they escape the „codes” and subjective views of the director? They can interpret themselves but they have no impact on the interpretations of others. Maybe the movie portrait or self-portrait is a mirror which „subjectively” reflects our self – reflects who we are? (...) I remember my experience from the pilot workshop for high school students and adults in Gdańsk (Poland) in 2012, when I was one of the instructors. I conducted an experimental exercise with the use of a camera, involving recording an answer to the question: „Who are you until now?”. A radio journalist recorded many hours of material throughout the workshop and edited it, so when I heard it on the radio – I was sure that „her portrait about me” is certainly „not me”. Thanks to this confrontation with myself – and each one before and after – I only confirm my belief that everyone has their own story and their own narration about themselves in their mind.

LANGUAGE OF STORYTELLING WITH PICTURES

Film art can be seen as a broad field of knowledge in which practice and concrete professional abilities can easily verify theory while technical and technological developments are capable of revolutionizing the poetics of film statements. But behind a film story there always is an author or a group of creators. So one could say that it is a subjective report of reality [in the case of a documentary film] or a report based on fantasy [in the case of a feature film]. These, of course, are no definitions – just descriptions of a certain point of view.

The hero. But it's me and/or – you, her, him, them – us. We choose a fragment of reality where we can be seen in a „consciously chosen” context. It can be even the smallest static element of a film – a single frame, which is like a picture, where that what can be seen has a meaning and can be interpreted differently by anyone.

Elements of film language grammar



Maybe there is a „code“ which is known to some and unknown to others? Yes – of course there is. But I think – based on implemented pilot workshop (2012-2015) – that on the one hand, interpretations break the rules of the „code“, and on the other hand, new generations create (supported by new technological „tools“ that create new modern theories which are based on the aforementioned „code“ - on the „elements of the film language grammar“) their own new „codes“. But are they completely new?

WE SEE IMAGES

Can we say the same about every image we register with our senses, which is not a movie or a part of a movie or a photo? In my opinion – yes. These reflections are important not only when we sit down in front of computer or TV. Even when we look outside the window of a car or a train we can see appearing images. These images of people and objects – either static or moving – are set in motion by us with the slightest movement of our eyes and our heads. Film has a kinetic nature (based on movement – real or apparent) in time and in a semantic context.

But when we stand in front of a mirror – do we also get a „kinetic image“? Registered or not – and are we ready to hand over this image for interpretation being in front of others? Who can interpret it and for what purpose? These questions, I feel, are very important and I leave them to you to reflect on.

HERO = AUTHOR = DISTRIBUTOR

We have outlined a situation where some images (their content – a person, people or objects moving or static) for us are in motion [i.e. when we see them on a screen] while with regard to other „images“ we are in motion [i.e. the view outside the window of a train]. Both of these situations create an observation space for some and a possibility of communication – narration – for others. In times when Internet is like air we become heroes, authors and publishers almost at the same time: you take a picture or a movie of yourself – one „click“ and it's published. You are „available“ for others – a part of your identity – your image. This set of tools is both an opportunity and a temptation. In my opinion this requires more knowledge about the meaning of the elements that build the image, which in turn builds our self-portrait – our subjective portrait. A basic knowledge of elements of the film language

Elements of film language grammar

grammar will help us with that. It's not a knowledge reserved for professionals but it is specialist knowledge.

THERE ARE QUESTIONS WITHOUT AN ANSWER – AND?

I'm glad that curiosity and even coincidences are the driving forces behind new forms of expression, also in film. Film experiments move all the time in the direction of new projection methods, ranging from 3D to holograms. Is this the near future? Internet, an invention not that old, gives us opportunities about which we could only dream 20 years ago. We can stream videos and sound over great distances. Cities use ever better cameras for monitoring and can see every detail. We gather great amounts of data about ourselves – even videos – but who will watch these for entertainment and who will for interpretation?

Left with these questions I'm not afraid of the lack of clear answers – I'm not looking for them. I think we have a chance to understand more and to consciously act with responsibility. The “codes” that built the basis of the professional skills of movie creators can help us with that. As a conscious hero or author we can create “images” of which we know the intentions. As a result, we will have opened ourselves up to dialogues and polemics. The film language grammar gives us that chance. As a set of rules, meanings, practices and restrictions, these elements can be helpful in many aspects of our lives and our actions.

FILM GRAMMAR

In the IDentifEYE concept we use one element of film language grammar. We use the shot size – that what can we see in a frame and its background – as an element of confrontation with ourselves and a self-interpretation through self-reflection.

Film language grammar has been framed by quite a few theoreticians. In the Polish film theory an interesting project was and maybe still is Bolesław Lewicki's film language grammar project [Bolesław W. Lewicki, *Gramatyka języka filmowego*, „Kwartalnik Filmowy”, 1959, nr 1]. He drew the consequences from existing conceptions. He designated film grammar as a discipline of film theory “which concerns itself ... with the morphological construction of a film, its permanent elements. Film grammar defines itself in an exact way as a science on editing film shot sizes and settings.” B.Lewicki judged that the subject of research on film grammar is the so-called film language “in its fundamental, logical form”. Film grammar thus researches and codifies the communicativeness of film, not concerning itself with its artistic expression. As Lewicki noticed the name “film grammar” should be understood to a certain extent as metaphorically, because it was extracted “from the sphere of linguistics to film theory because of a concrete structural and morphological kinship occurring between film works and works of literature.”

What now – when the language of film storytelling does not submit itself to a loosely or forced quest for norms or attempts to judge the meaning of film language? Isn't it worth it to research the visible narrative – film, photos – by means of elements of film language grammar? In my opinion it is worth it – it always gives a meta-basis for our own language of narration –our own experiences. There can always be a first time.

Elements of film language grammar

AND YOU?

Even though the times have changed, the context changes even more dynamically and the frames change too. Even more so – one person can be a “frame”. The rapid development of the quality of the images, the mass access to amateur (and even professional) film equipment, the changed and shortened film production processes, the unrestricted geographic options for instant publication and distribution - this all outlines an interesting area of reflection about how the abilities of conscious reflection and self-reflection. Our presentations and self-presentations create narrations. This is a challenge in the Internet era. We can see it becoming a challenge for youngsters but also for adults who use image narration in easily accessible communication channels. Do they understand what their communications mean or how they are being interpreted? Do I understand it? DO YOU? This is the frame of our search – join us – and start off with these reflections. It could be exciting...

For me it is fascinating to look for educational tools – workshops methods – based on stable theories and practices of film art, as different areas of artistic expression. They build narrations in time and as a film reaches the viewer, they stimulate their individual and collective abilities for the interpretation of meanings.

A film reaches the viewer thus awakening their individual and collective capabilities for interpreting meaning. Film language came into existence at the moment that the first creators of moving images understood the difference between loosely connected images representing the different stages of movement and an “idea”, within which images can remain in a definite context to each other. By means of connecting two different symbols new meanings come into existence, gaining a new way to show emotions or ideas.

People's needs to observe and communicate are an impulse to create new tools, however “what can be seen in a frame (shot size)” for a long time will remain a universal base for the grammar of the language of image storytelling and an area for experiments and individual narrating decisions. That's why many people look for ways... to know and understand the world... This is a never ending process. What is amazing about it: everyone has a right to do so. And if they experiments with empathy and reflections – even sometimes making mistakes – I will support it. This is only my – subjective - point of view.

Bibliography:

Grammar of the Film Language [2008], *Daniel Arijon*

Cierpliwe oko [1977], Bez fikcji [1985], Odczytać czas [1999], Rozmowa o dokumencie [2000], *Kazimierz Karabasz [BIBLIOTEKA PAŃSTWOWEJ WYŻSZEJ SZKOŁY FILMOWEJ TELEWIZYJNEJ I TEATRALNEJ IM. L.SCHILLERA W Łodzi]*

If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die: The Power of Color in Visual Storytelling [2009], *Patti Bellantoni*

Creating the Visual Structure of Film, TV and Digital Media [2010] , *Bruce Block*

Elements of film language grammar

The Filmmaker's Eye: Learning (and Breaking) the Rules of Cinematic Composition. [2011], *Gustavo Mercado*

Interplay. The Process of Interpersonal Communication [2006], *Adler Ronald, Russell Proctor II, Lawrence Rosenfeld*

The myth of Sisyphus [1942], *Albert Camus*

Kino i wyobraźnia [1975], *Edgar Morin*