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Meaning and Film: Setting the Agenda for an Embodied Cognitive Approach

Abstract: This paper takes up the challenge of setting up a preliminary research framework for analysing meaning in film from the perspective of the embodied cognition thesis. We first establish the theoretical context from which this framework emerges, starting with a discussion of a paradox that lies at the heart of the relationship between meaning and film. Second, we briefly discuss what has been the most influential model in film theory for dealing with this paradox, namely the linguistic model (also known as the “film as language” view). At the same time, we argue why this model is no longer sustainable in the light of the recent “embodied turn” in cognitive science. Third and last, we show how an embodied view of meaning forces us to address the paradox of cinematic meaning anew, thus prompting the need for a new research agenda.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, embodied cognition, film style, image schema, meaning.

1. Introduction

Filmmakers and film scholars alike have always been fascinated by the meaning-making dimensions of cinema. Theoretical models for analysing meaning in film can be found in almost every strand of film theory, from early Sovjet montage theory (e.g., Eisenstein), the structuralist-semiotic approach (e.g., Metz; Wollen) to the cognitive study of the moving image (e.g., Bordwell). How intuitively obvious the attribution of the concept of meaning to cinema may be, the less clear it is from a purely logical point-of-view. That this relationship is less evident than it appears at first sight becomes clear once we consider the logical

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form of the following set of assumptions:

- (1) Films are capable of communicating meaning to viewers.
- (2) Meaning is a matter of conceptual structure.
- (3) Films, as opposed to words, do not connect to concepts.
- (4) How, then, can film be capable of communicating conceptual meaning?

So despite the fact that premise (1) sounds intuitively true, it bears a set of premises ((2) and (3)), that, apparently, seem to contradict each other. We shall label this logical inconsistency which leads again to a questioning of the relationship between meaning and cinema (4), the *paradox of cinematic meaning*. The aims of this paper, then, are threefold. First, to consider the theoretical context upon which this paradox is built. Second, to discuss what has been the most influential model in film theory for dealing with it, namely the linguistic model (i.e., the “film-as-language” hypothesis). Third and last, to argue why this model is no longer sustainable in the light of the “embodied turn” in cognitive science and to show how this reorientation of theoretical focus forces us to address the paradox of cinematic cinema anew.

2. The paradox of cinematic meaning

Let us start our investigation of the paradox by considering the question underlying the first premise: On what conditions does successful communication of meaning depend? Perhaps the most straightforward answer to this question has been provided by the British philosopher Paul Grice. In his influential article from 1957 called “Meaning” the author has argued that communication of meaning is successful insofar the perceiver of the representation (e.g., the hearer) understands the representation that is being communicated (e.g., the utterance), that is, and here is where the central claim of his argument becomes manifest, insofar the perceiver recognizes the communicator’s intention to represent, and further recognizes that he is intended to recognize it. In Grice’s own words, “for A to mean something by x, A must intend to induce by x a belief in an audience, and he must also intend his utterance to be recognized as so intended” (383). This aspect is also known as the “self-referentiality” of the intention to communicate and is, as the American philosopher John Searle pointed out fifty years later, “seldom remarked on” (“Grice” 11). The crucial question, then, is this: if successful communication of meaning depends on the audience’s recognition of the communicator’s intention to represent the meaning, how then can this recognition be achieved? The key to answering this question lies in the representation x. Here we may quote Noël Carroll who adds the following note to Grice’s analysis: “the intention A intends to be recognized must be discernible in x. Where x is an artwork, the intention the artist means to convey must be discernible in the work” (“Art Interpretation” 119-120).¹ If we further define this intention in terms of mental conceptual structure (let us call this y), it follows that y has to be imposed onto x for it is only when y is embodied in x that the audience will be able to extract y from x, and thus achieve recognition of the communicator’s intention.

The conception of meaning and communication just sketched out is not anew, but echoes the underlying theoretical assumptions of two different, but neighbouring areas of research, namely *cognitive semantics* and *inferential pragmatics*. The first discipline began in the 1970s and initiated a radical critique of the truth-conditional view of meaning in language, as advocated by the Anglo-American tradition in philosophy (e.g., Davidson; Searle, “Speech Acts”). This view rests upon the assumption that meaning can be objectively described as a relationship between words and an objective external reality and that this relationship can be modelled in terms of truth or falsity. Cognitive semantics, as put forth by such scholars as Leonard Talmy, George Lakoff and Ronald Langacker, rejects this view, which inevitably leads to an undervaluation of the role of the mind and asserts instead that semantic structure (i.e., the meanings conventionally associated with words) can be equated with conceptual structure: “the nature and organisation of mental representations in all its richness and diversity” (Evans and Green 156). Moreover, cognitive semantics claims that this conceptual structure is fundamentally embodied. This principle is known as the “embodied cognition thesis” and roughly states that the nature of conceptual content emerges from bodily experiences and interactions with the environment (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson).

The second discipline began to flourish in the late 1970s and 1980s and initiated an alternative to the classical code model of communication according to which utterances are signals that encode messages and comprehension is achieved by decoding the signals to obtain the messages. On the inferential view, originally suggested by Grice, but further developed by such scholars as Wilson and Sperber, representations such as utterances are not signals, but pieces of evidence about the speaker’s meaning, and comprehension is achieved by inferring this meaning from evidence provided by the representation and the context in which it is produced (Wilson and Sperber 2).

What quality, then, does the representation need to possess in order for it to express and externalise the conceptual structure? The general answer is that the representation has to ‘connect to’ the conceptual structure. As for language, the key focus of both cognitive semantics and inferential pragmatics, this connection is inherent to its *symbolic* function. When we use language and write the word “tree”, the meaning conventionally paired with it, is not the particular physical object of a tree, but the idea of a tree, that is, the *concept* of a tree (Evans and Green 7). As a result of this pairing of form and concept, language is often taken at face value when discussing the process of transmitting meaning from one entity to another. This is evidenced in the many references people make to language when talking about the phenomenon of communication itself (i.e., our meta-language). Consider, for example, the following list of English expressions, as compiled by the cognitive linguist Michael Reddy:

Whenever you have a good *idea* practice capturing it *in words*. You have to *put* each *concept* *into words* very carefully. Try to *pack* more *thoughts* into fewer

words. Insert those *ideas* elsewhere in the paragraph. Don't force your meanings into the wrong words (167).

As Reddy has argued these expressions can be seen as linguistic manifestations of a general metaphor system which he coins the "conduit metaphor". According to this metaphor people, when communicating, "insert" internal concepts (e.g., ideas, thoughts, emotions) "into" external "containers" (e.g., words, phrases, sentences, etc.) whose contents are then "extracted" by listeners and readers. Because language allows for a symbolic assembly of form and meaning, it is only natural to refer to words and paragraphs as the proper "insides" wherein the meaning can reside. Diagrammatically, this "trajectory" from mind to language might be represented as in Figure 1 by means of an arrow running from one container to another. The first part of the trajectory designates an EXIT path: the conceptual meaning goes from inside the communicator's head (the body as container for the mind) to its outside. The second pattern, by contrast, describes an ENTRY path: the meaning goes from outside the communicator's head to the inside of language.² As argued, this ENTRY path is facilitated by the symbolic function of language.

Figure 1. Language as the "conduit" of conceptual structure.

A look at film, however, reveals a far more complicated picture. First, there is the question of identifying the communicator. Who is the 'speaker' in a medium that usually implies the contribution of more than one individual? Raising this question brings us to the complicated matter of authorship in cinema (e.g., Livingston; Meskin). Exploring this debate lies beyond the scope of this paper. Here it is sufficient to say that whoever the communicator in film may be, whether it be an individual mind or a collective of minds, it does not change anything to the central principle of cognitive semantics that meaning is conceptual structure. In other words, it is less important to know to which physical body the conceptual structure can be attributed than to assume for now that it is conceptual structure that is being manifested in the representation

whether it be an utterance or, as in our case, a film.³ Following Turner, let us call this unspecified mind to which the conceptual structure adheres, “the artful mind”.

Second and more importantly there is the complicated nature of film itself. This complexity has its origin in at least two sources. The first source is that film, as opposed to language, can be conceived metaphorically as a container for many other subcontainers: one for each mode of representation it contains (a visual container, a gestural container, a musical container, a linguistic container, etc.). In other words, the “trajectory” of meaning that runs from the inner mind to the external level of representation does not develop in one direction as it is the case with language, but in various directions, thus giving rise to many potential ENTRY paths. Moreover, these paths do not co-exist as parallel lines. Belonging to the generic container called “film”, they are interconnected thus influencing each other in various ways.

The second source of complexity is that many of these subcontainers have a profoundly different ontological status than language. Take, for instance, the visual subcontainer, the one most relevant to our understanding of cinema. It has been frequently noted in the literature that pictorial representations, as opposed to words, maintain a relationship with the represented reality that is based on resemblance rather than on arbitrary convention (e.g., Prince, “The Discourse”). They are what semioticians call *iconic* signs instead of symbolic ones (Chandler 36). Although iconic signs do not literally possess the properties of the represented or denoted object, they nevertheless seem to “reproduce” some of its properties (Eco, “Introduction” 1). In film studies this is often further explicated in causal terms. As Gaut (52) writes, “we speak of a photograph of some object only if that object caused a light pattern to be imprinted on the photographic emulsion”. This causal relation, the author points out, is not arbitrary, but “fixed by empirical facts”. In other words, if the symbolic function of language facilitates the transference of concepts, and this function is absent from iconic images, how then can these images connect to conceptual structure?

The picture becomes even more complicated when we consider the subcontainer of music (“pure” or “absolute” instrumental music, that is), which appears to be quite different from the standard representational arts, such as (figurative) painting, photography and literature (e.g., Scruton; Walton). As Scruton asks himself: “is there anything, other than itself, that music means?” (118). For this reason, because music lacks a clear object or reference, it can be categorised as “abstract” (Walton, *What is Abstract* 351). Consequently, if the representational capability of music is questioned and this capability is conditional for communicating meaning, how then can music become a container for meaning? It is a question frequently posed, but seldomly answered in a manner that is satisfying.

It should be obvious by now, then, that the question of “entrance” of meaning is much more complicated in film than it is in language. It is at this point in our argument that we can see how the paradox of cinematic meaning starts to emerge: film (at first sight) seems to lack the form-concept pairing that makes symbolic language such a

suitable container for the storage of meaning, yet scholars and layman alike assume that film, just like language, is capable of expressing meaning. In a diagrammatical way, this may be visualised as in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The paradox of cinematic meaning.

Given this diagram, then, one may argue that the key challenge lies in finding a way to reconcile the conceptual structure of meaning with the distinctive representational structure of film by facing such questions as “How can conceptual structure be bridged to the iconic surface of visual representations?”, “How can music be meaningful while at the same time being non-representational?” and “How do the answers to these questions interact with each other within the generic container called film?” Yet, from early on, film scholars have predominantly preferred to evade these questions by pursuing another challenge, one that is not so much motivated by the essential differences between film and language, but by the question of how meaning in film can be modelled upon linguistic, symbolic meaning. The broad metaphor used to describe this linguistic turn in film studies has come to known as the “film as language” metaphor.

3. The “film as language” metaphor

Ever since the birth of cinema it has been customary to talk about film as if it were a “readable text” with its own “syntax” and “grammar”. References to linguistic terminology can be traced back to the earliest writings on film (e.g., Eisenstein; Lindsay; Pudovkin, Spottiswoode) to reach its height in the 1970s with the rise of film semiotics (e.g., Bettetini; J. Carroll; Eco; Metz; Peters).⁴ Taken together, phrases such as “the cinematic text”, “cinema speech”, “the grammar of film” or “the language of

film” provide linguistic evidence for the existence of the FILM AS LANGUAGE metaphor (see also, J. Carroll). This metaphor presumes a set of cross-domain mappings between the source domain of language and the target domain of film (usually restricted to the visual subcontainer), some of which are summarised as in Table 1.⁵

Table 1. The FILM AS LANGUAGE metaphor.

Source domain [Language]	Target Domain [Film]
Text	Film
Reading	Film comprehension
Words	Shots
Sentences	A montage sequence
Syntax	Principles for combining shots

It is not difficult to see why this metaphor is so appealing. Because most of us assume that film can be meaningful in the same way that language is meaningful, it makes intuitive sense to draw on linguistic terminology to describe our understanding of film. But what does this analogy substantially mean? What does it mean to say that a non-symbolic medium such as film can be compared to a symbolic medium such as language and more importantly what are its consequences for the conception of meaning in cinema? To avoid any misunderstanding it might be useful to first distinguish, as John Carroll (31) did, between two general ways of interpreting the analogy between film and language, namely as a strong *theoretical* claim or as a weaker *methodological* assumption (see also Buckland, “Film Semiotics” 88). The theoretical claim asserts that language and cinema resemble one another directly. They are conceived of as members of the same natural kind. The methodological assumption, by contrast, asserts no such theoretical claim, but instead stresses the methodological value of using linguistic models as a means for guiding film theory. The theoretical claim seems hardly to defend for a number of obvious reasons which we will not elaborate on here. Therefore we will only limit ourselves to the justification of the methodological argument. To see its appeal, let us consider, for example, the following series of images, as cited from the introduction of John Carroll’s book:

- (1) A close-up shot (i.e., face only) of a man, A, smiling.
- (2) A medium-shot (i.e., from the waist up) of two men, A and B, engaged in conversation.
- (3) A long-shot (i.e., revealing both men completely) of the two men A and B parting; they wave to one another as they walk off.

The order above implies that the smiling gesture of A in (1) invited the conversation. However, as Carroll (1) further points out, if we should put the same images in a different order, we would get an entirely different meaning: the order (2), (1), (3) suggests that something in the conversation pleased A, whereas the order (2), (3) and (1) suggests A’s overall satisfaction with meeting B. This observation led many

scholars to believe that the conveyance of meaning in film works quite similar to the conveyance of meaning in language, that is, just like the meaning of a sentence depends on the order of the individual words, so does the meaning of a scene depends on the order of the individual images. Since the discipline of structural linguistics, as it was founded by Ferdinand de Saussure, was considered to be the most sophisticated discipline for analysing a discourse's underlying reality, it was only logical, from a methodological point-of view, that its conceptual tools should also be extended into the realm of film. Hence, the birth of classical film semiotics (see also Buckland, "Film Semiotics" 88). Of major importance in its development were the writings of Christian Metz who, in the 1960s and 1970s, undertook the task of lending the *FILM IS LANGUAGE* metaphor more theoretical weight by modelling film's underlying reality on the rules and structures governing the linguistic sign. As Metz himself put it, "the task of the semiotics of the filmic fact" is "to analyse film texts in order to discover either textual systems, cinematic codes, or sub-codes" ("Language and Cinema" 150). It would take us too far afield to consider the methodological issues of such an attempt in detail. For our present purpose, however, it is more important to consider the theoretical implications of such an undertaking for the concept of meaning in cinema. In the previous section we already argued that meaning is fundamentally mind-dependent, that is, in order for a representation to be meaningful, the representation has to connect to the internal conceptual structure of the mind (i.e., the representation as the manifestation of conceptual structure). Comprehension occurs when the observer is able to infer this content on the basis of the evidence provided by the representation. This requires a degree of recognition which can only happen if the representation externalizes the conceptual structure. This in turn led us to formulate the ontological paradox of cinematic meaning: how can film externalise concepts given that film, for its largest part, does not connect to concepts as language does through its symbolic form? By contrast, the linguistic approach to meaning, such as the one initiated by Metz, is fundamentally mind-independent. Its dependence on the linguistic notion of a sign adheres primarily to a relational and objective conception of meaning according to which meaning is based on *differences* between signs.

But how, then, can film semiotics provide us with a satisfying account of meaning in cinema if we assume that meaning is unavoidably tied to the conceptual structure of the mind? The answer here is as follows: a linguistic approach to meaning can only be justified insofar it is supported by a science of the mind that similarly puts the arbitrariness of the sign at the centre of its theoretical claims. Such an objectivist approach to psychology was provided in the 1950s with what now is commonly referred to as "first-generation cognitive science" or the science of the "disembodied mind". Having its roots in artificial intelligence, information-processing psychology, analytic philosophy of mind and language, and Noam Chomsky's idea of an innate grammar, it assumed a view according to which the mind is symbolic and algorithmic. Because these symbols are linked arbitrarily to the perceptual states that

produce them, the comparison to language was easily made (i.e., Fodor's hypothesis of the "language of thought"). Similarly to how words typically have arbitrary relations to entities in the world, these symbols of the mind have arbitrary relations to perceptual states. It is precisely for this reason that Barsalou calls these symbols "amodal": "Just as the word 'chair' has no systematic similarity to physical chairs, the amodal symbol for chair has no systematic similarity to perceived chairs" (578-579). As Johnson ("The Meaning" 202) points out, this (false) idea that all human thinking has the form of a language is deeply entrenched in our ordinary and philosophical discourse. Because it is so common for humans to express their thoughts in language (recall Reddy's conduit metaphor from above), "we are easily seduced into believing that the operations of mind and thought are structured like the operations of written and spoken language" (Johnson, "The Meaning" 202). We presuppose, as Johnson (202) labels it, the THOUGHT AS LANGUAGE metaphor (see Table 2). This metaphor is evidenced in expressions such as "Let me make a *mental note* of that," "She's an *open book* to me – I can *read* her every thought," "The public *misread* the President's intentions," and "Do you think I'm some kind of mind-reader?"

Table 2. The THOUGHT AS LANGUAGE metaphor (after Johnson, "The Meaning").

Source domain [Linguistic Acts]	Target Domain [Thinking]
Linguistic activity (speaking/writing)	Thinking
Words	Ideas
Sentences	Complex ideas
Spelling	Communicating a sequence of thoughts
Writing	Memorization

Consequently, if the mind is believed to share a formal language consisting entirely of arbitrary symbols, and meaning is conceived to be a matter of the mind, it follows that *all* meaning is linguistic meaning, including meaning in film. As to the definition of linguistic meaning, approaches differ. As we already saw, Saussure viewed linguistic meaning as essentially based on differences *within* language. By contrast, truth-based approaches to linguistic meaning conceive meaning as a relation between words and objective (mind-independent) reality (see, e.g., Iten). According to this "objectivist theory of meaning" conventional and arbitrary signs such as words become meaningful insofar they refer to the state of affairs in the world (e.g., things, persons, events). Despite these differences, they nevertheless share one core assumption, namely that meaning is best captured in terms of a conception of human thought that, similar to the arbitrary nature of language, is disembodied, that is, a mind separated from its body and its world (Johnson, "The Meaning" 272).

Consequently, by providing a conception of the mind within the language analysis tradition, first-generation cognitive science provided film semioticians with "the ideal paradigm" for their linguistic method (Buckland, "The Cognitive" 18). This can be

derived from the following line of reasoning:

- (1) Meaning is a matter of conceptual structure.
- (2) Like language, this conceptual structure is arbitrary and disembodied (the THOUGHT AS LANGUAGE metaphor).
- (3) Hence, meaning can be equated with linguistic meaning.
- (4) If film wants to have true meaning it has to be modelled on linguistic meaning.
- (5) Hence, in order to study this meaning one has to consider the semantic or syntactic rules that govern the non-perceptible system underlying film (i.e., the research aim of film semiotics).

As Buckland has pointed out, the engagement of film semiotics with first-generation cognitive science, in particular Noam Chomsky's transformational generative grammar, has led a number of European film theorists, among them Chateau and Colin, to overcome what he coins the "translinguistics of Metz's film semiotics", that is, "Metz's insistence that film semiotics be based exclusively on the methods of structural linguistics" ("The Cognitive" 2). Buckland refers to this next "maturation" stage of semiotic film theory as the "cognitive semiotics of film".

More importantly, however, from the perspective of this article, first-generation cognitive science provided film semioticians with a scientific and formal argument for overcoming the paradox of cinematic meaning. Since Fodor's language of thought metaphor seduces us to believe that conceptual structure, the locus of meaning, has the form of a language (not a natural one, but a formal one) and the film as language metaphor seduces us to believe that film's underlying reality can be modelled on natural language's underlying reality, it follows that the natural incoherence between mind and film is bridged (i.e., because of the assumption of an identity), thus allowing the transference of meaning in film to take place through its disembodied "syntax" or "grammar". Schematically, this can be represented as in figure 3.

Over the last two decades the linguistic approach to meaning in film has met with increasing criticism, especially from Anglo-Saxon quarters (e.g., N. Carroll; Currie; Prince; Pryluck).⁶ Part of it has been directed to the strong theoretical claim of a direct resemblance between film and natural language (e.g., Currie). This point of criticism, however, seems rather ill placed, as Buckland ("Film Semiotics" 99) has counter-argued, because Metz himself has repeatedly stated that film is not analogous to natural language (film is a *language sans langue*). As we have seen, film semiotics was not so much founded on any direct resemblance between film and language, but on methodological grounds, the idea that film's specific, underlying reality could be reconstructed by the methods of structural linguistics. Nevertheless there seems to me that there are three more fundamental reasons why the linguistic approach seems to fail in providing the scholar with a satisfactory account of meaning in cinema.

The first reason is that the linguistic view of meaning is simply too narrow and too reductionist. As Mark Johnson ("Identity" 21) aptly puts it: "if you assume that meaning

film and language. In other words, the problem is not that film semiotics strive to find a deeper structure that is shared by both film and language – in fact, we will see later that the embodied approach to meaning does just the same – but that the structure they propose (the disembodied, linguistic one) is a very limited one because it diverts attention “from those aspects that may be unique to film” (Pryluck 123). In case of film, this implies, above all, that the common structure should be in accordance with, to quote Prince (“Psychoanalytic” 80), “a recognition of cinematic images as iconic rather than as symbolic signs, depending on relations of similarity to, rather than difference from, what they represent.”

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly is that the propositional view of meaning in recent years has lost a great deal of its theoretical weight and rhetorical power as a new paradigm entered the field that took over the place from its intellectual ally, first-generation cognitive science. This shift has been referred to as “second-generation cognitive science” or the science of the “embodied mind”.

4. Towards an embodied view of meaning in cinema

In contrast to first-generation cognitive science, embodied cognitive science treats the mind, concepts, meaning, and rationality as fundamentally embodied, and therefore as not reducible merely to the functional relations and programs of a disembodied Cartesian machine. Theoretical support for this view is highly disparate and can be derived from various intellectual sources as diverse as linguistics, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and neurophysiology. Despite a great deal of interpretational variety among these disciplines, they nevertheless share, in lesser or greater degree, the thesis that conceptual structure arises from bodily, social and cultural experience, so part what makes conceptual organisation meaningful are the experiences with which it is associated. Two scholars that have contributed considerable to the theoretical and methodological development of the embodied cognition thesis have been the cognitivist linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson. Together they proposed a theory of embodied cognition of which its central constituent elements might be isolated in the following condensed form:

- (1) Conceptual structures arise from the nature of human bodily interaction with the external world. This connection is captured, among others, by the theoretical notion of an “image schema”.
- (2) Image schemas are relatively abstract conceptual patterns that arise directly from our everyday interaction with and observation of the world around us. These patterns are intrinsically meaningful by virtue of their connection to our bodies and our embodied experience. They cannot be characterised adequately by meaningless symbols.
- (3) These image schemas, in turn, provide the bodily basis for “conceptual metaphors”. We recruit their concrete inferential logic in order to reason about abstract concepts.

Perhaps the easiest way to explain this line of reasoning is with an illustration such as the one offered by Evans and Green (157-158). Imagine a man locked up in a room. Being a bounded landmark, a room has the structural properties of an interior, a boundary and an exterior. As a result of these properties, the man is unable to leave the room, that is, he is contained. This follows from both the properties of the container as well as the constitution of the human body. For instance, in contrast to ants, humans cannot crawl through the gaps under the doors. In other words, “containment is a meaningful consequence of a particular type of physical relationship that we experience in interaction with the external world” (Evans and Green 158).

The concept associated with containment is an instance of what Lakoff and Johnson (“Philosophy” 31-32) refer to as an “image schema”, in this case, the CONTAINER image schema (see also Lakoff 271). It is a gestalt structure in the sense that the parts only make sense with a whole. The meaning of one part depends on the relation to the other parts. There is only an outside if there is also a boundary and an inside, an inside if there is also an outside and a boundary, and a boundary if there are also sides.

Let us now consider principle (3) of Lakoff and Johnson’s theory and illustrate how the logic of containment might be further appropriated in order to conceptualise abstract concepts. Take, for instance, the following list of linguistic expressions from Lakoff and Johnson (“Metaphors” 32):

He is *in* love. We’re *out of* trouble now. He’s *coming out of* the coma. I’m *slowly getting into* shape. He *entered* a state of euphoria. He *fell into* a depression.

What is striking about these examples is that they represent ordinary everyday ways of talking about mental states. There is nothing stylised or overtly poetic about these expressions. However, they are clearly non-literal. You cannot literally “fell into” a depression or literally “enter” a state of euphoria. As Lakoff and Johnson (“Metaphors” 30-32) have argued, examples like the ones above are all motivated by the same metaphorical projection of the CONTAINER schema onto the more abstract conceptual domain of STATES.

Given this brief example, let us now consider the implications of Lakoff and Johnson’s thesis of embodied cognition for our conception of meaning in cinema.

First and foremost, the embodied cognition thesis leads to a fundamentally new hypothesis on the nature of meaning in cinema. If meaning in film is a matter of conceptual structure, and it is assumed by many that this conceptual structure is not disembodied, but embodied, then it follows that meaning in cinema is also embodied, that is, “it arises through embodied organism-environmental interactions in which significant patterns are marked within the flow of experience” (Johnson, “The Meaning” 273).

Second, with the formulation of this new hypothesis comes also the need to readdress the central question inherent to the paradox of cinematic meaning, namely,

how does film connect to conceptual structure? Film semioticians answered this question by examining the linguistic, disembodied rules underlying the reality of film. In doing so, they were able to establish a connection with the disembodied nature of conceptual structure. However, since conceptual structure is assumed to be no longer disembodied, this assumption of an identity becomes problematic, thus prompting the need to go back to the drawing table to re-establish the connection anew, this time from the perspective of embodied cognition. Diagrammatically, this can be represented as in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Readdressing the paradox: the embodied view of meaning in film.

Lastly, given the constituents of Lakoff and Johnson's embodied and experientialist view of meaning, any such academic undertaking in re-establishing the connection should take into account the following tasks:

- (1) Identify the image schemas upon which the notion of embodied conceptual structure is based.
- (2) Examine how these image schemas may be elicited in film.
- (3) Identify, within the film, possible target domains to which these image schemas may be extended.
- (4) Make the connection between (2) and (3).

In considering the first task, the film scholar may turn to the discipline of cognitive linguistics. Over the years, scholars in this field have identified and discussed a wide

range of image schematic structures on the basis of analysing linguistic expressions. For instance, Hampe (2) and Evans and Green (190) already did an excellent job in compiling the findings of various scholars (including Lakoff and Johnson) into provisional lists of image schemas. Table 3 below shows the list from Evans and Green as they were grouped according to the nature of their experiential grounding.

Table 3. A partial list of image schemas (after Evans and Green 190)

SPACE	UP-DOWN, FRONT-BACK, LEFT-RIGHT, NEAR-FAR, CENTRE-PERIPHERY, CONTACT, STRAIGHT, VERTICALITY
CONTAINMENT	CONTAINER, IN-OUT, SURFACE, FULL-EMPTY, CONTENT
LOCOMOTION	MOMENTUM, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL
BALANCE	AXIS BALANCE, TWIN-PAN BALANCE, POINT BALANCE, EQUILIBRIUM
FORCE	COMPULSION, BLOCKAGE, COUNTERFORCE, DIVERSION, REMOVAL OF RESTRAINT, ENABLEMENT, ATTRACTION, RESISTANCE
UNITY/MULTIPLICITY	MERGING, COLLECTION, SPLITTING, ITERATION, PART-WHOLE, COUNT-MASS, LINK(AGE)
IDENTITY	MATCHING, SUPERIMPOSITION
EXISTENCE	REMOVAL, BOUNDED SPACE, CYCLE, OBJECT, PROCESS

As to the second task, this is where the film scholar steps into his own field of expertise as he now has to find a way to connect the logic of image schemas to the logic of film. Here we are again confronted with facing such questions as “How can image schemas be bridged to the iconic surface of visual representations?”, “How can musical sounds elicit image schematic logic?” and “How do the answers to these questions relate to each other?” Although an extensive and systematic theoretical study of these questions is still lacking, attempts of integrating the concept of an image schema into film studies can be found in various studies (e.g., Bordwell; Branigan “Projecting”; Buckland “The Cognitive”; Coëgnarts and Kravanja; Fahlenbrach, Forceville and Jeulink).

In the search for a response to the challenge posed by iconic representations, the film scholar may find inspiration in Gestalt theory, in particular the writings of its foremost advocate, Rudolph Arnheim. In applying the Gestalt principles to art, he systematically challenged the dualistic view of meaning according to which images of art (the domain of visual perception) cannot exhibit concepts (the domain of thought). According to the author, the visual arts offer more than merely illustrations of events or things. They are a homeground of what he calls “visual thinking” (Arnheim, “Visual Thinking” 254).

To trace visual thinking in images, Arnheim (255) argued, one must look for “significant structural patterns” because it is through these patterns, which underlie the perception of form, that the specifiable themes or conceptual meanings of the work are spelled out. Underlying this approach are three fundamental assumptions, which, following Dhir (101), may be summarized as follows: (1) “perceptual configurations can only be apprehended and understood through their interrelatedness within a total structure”, (2) “the composition of a work is coincident with its meaning” and

(3) “form is intrinsically expressive”. In his emphasis on “hidden skeletal structures” of perceptual content the reader may notice a close analogy with Lakoff and Johnson’s notion of an “image schema”. This is acknowledged by Johnson himself who, in *The Body in The Mind*, draws significantly on Arnheim’s analysis of balance in the visual arts in order to develop his own conception of an image schema. Hence, if static visual works of art are capable of eliciting hidden image schematic patterns through their form and composition, as Arnheim so eloquently demonstrates throughout his writings, then we might assume that moving pictures are equally capable of eliciting image schematic structure through their visual style.⁷

As to the question, “What is film style?”, scholars may turn to Bordwell and Thompson’s introduction to film as art. In their introduction to the analysis of cinema, *Film Art: An Introduction*, the authors broadly refer to the stylistic system of a film as the “patterned and significant use of techniques” (175). These techniques are further divided into four areas: two techniques of the shot (mise-en-scene and cinematography), the technique that relates shot to shot, editing, and the relation of sound to film images. It is through the application of these techniques then that one may assume that films are capable of imposing image-schematic structures onto the spatial and visible world of events in such a way as to reach a level of abstraction necessary to elicit conceptual metaphors.

To illustrate this, let us recall the CONTAINER image schema. We know from above that this schema is characterised by three structural features: an inside, an outside and a boundary. Let us now consider the notion of a filmic frame (a concept which can be situated within the area of cinematography). It is clear from our language about frames, as evidenced by the expressions “in frame” and “out of frame” that the filmic frame shares the properties of the CONTAINER image schema.⁸ As table 4 shows, evidence of this congruence can be found in the way the inferences true of bounded regions also hold for frames.

Table 4. The frame as container.

Inferences true of bounded regions	Inferences true of frames
If you’re <i>in</i> a bounded region, you’re not <i>out</i> of that bounded region.	If you’re <i>in</i> a frame, you’re not <i>out</i> of that frame.
If you’re <i>out</i> of a bounded region, you’re not <i>in</i> that bounded region.	If you’re <i>out</i> of a frame you’re not <i>in</i> that frame.
If you’re deep <i>in</i> a bounded region, you are far from being <i>out</i> of that bounded region.	If you’re deep <i>in</i> a frame, you are far from being <i>out</i> of that frame.
If you are <i>on the edge</i> of a bounded region, then you’re <i>close to</i> being in that bounded region.	If you are <i>on the edge</i> of a frame; then you are <i>close to</i> being <i>in</i> that frame.

Let us now consider the third task and identify possible abstract target domains to which the inferential logic of image schemas may be extended metaphorically. As with the first task we might look for inspiration in the field of cognitive linguistics. One

conceptual domain that has been recognized in the literature to serve as an ideal target domain for conceptual metaphors is the category of the MIND (Lakoff and Johnson; Sweetser). Following Searle’s distinction, this category can be identified as essentially ontologically subjective (as opposed to ontologically objective). Its existence depends entirely on the experience of a human or animal subject (hence, the term observer-dependent). The majority of the concepts we use to describe the mind (e.g., thoughts, cognitions, memories, emotions, beliefs) are “categories that have been formed and named by the human mind to represent and explain the human mind” (Barrett 329). As various cognitive linguists (e.g., Kövecses; Lakoff and Johnson) demonstrate, these concepts function as target domains for a wide range of conceptual metaphors (e.g., THINKING IS MOVING, KNOWING IS SEEING, UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING, EMOTIONS ARE CONTAINERS) that together constitute the core metaphor system of the MIND IS A BODY (Lakoff and Johnson, “Philosophy” 235-236; Sweetser).

Likewise, one may argue that the same target domains play a fundamental role in narrative cinema. Given that narrative organisation is driven by events that involve characters and characters, as fictional beings, are believed to share, what Eder (24) calls, the “property domain of the mind”, we might assume that mental events are also an important aspect of narrative organisation.

As a brief case-study, let us consider a mental concept of which it has been claimed that the CONTAINER schema plays an important role in conceptualising it, namely a VISUAL FIELD. A visual field refers to all the objects and state of affairs that come into view when you open your eyes in a certain direction.⁹ As the word “into” in this definition already suggests, our most fundamental understanding of what visual fields are, comes from a metaphor in which a visual field is conceptualised as a bounded region in space or a container. This metaphor, which Lakoff and Johnson (“Metaphors” 30) call, the VISUAL FIELDS ARE CONTAINERS metaphor, is licensed by such expressions as “The ship is *coming into* view” or “I have him *in* sight”. As shown in table 5, inferential evidence for this metaphor is provided by the systematic relationship between the logic of bounded regions in space, as already outlined above, and the logic of visual fields.

Table 5. The VISUAL FIELDS ARE CONTAINERS metaphor

Inferences true of bounded regions	Inferences true of visual fields
If you're <i>in</i> a bounded region, you're not <i>out</i> of that bounded region.	If you're <i>in</i> my visual field, you're not <i>out</i> of my visual field.
If you're <i>out</i> of a bounded region, you're not <i>in</i> that bounded region.	If you're <i>out</i> of my visual field you're not <i>in</i> my visual field.

Let us now consider the last task and consider how the same metaphorical connection might be established in film. We already saw how the inferential logic of the CONTAINER image schema is expressed through the frame. What is missing, however, is the target domain of perception that allows us to map the inferential logic

of the CONTAINER schema, as inherent to the frame, onto the concept of a character's visual field. Cognitive linguists (e.g., Yu) have pointed out in this regard that the target domain of perception may be elicited metonymically by the body part that is causally responsible for the mental activity of seeing, namely the eyes (the EYES FOR SEEING metonymy).¹⁰ This, in turn, brings us to the essential role of embodied acting and gestural behaviour (e.g., Kemp). The target domain of perception may be triggered non-verbally by showing a shot of the character physically directing his eyes to an object. If this shot then is linked, by means of editing, to a subsequent shot showing what the character is looking at (the object), the metaphorical projection can take place.¹¹ In film analysis, this mechanism is commonly known as the point-of-view shot (henceforth, POV shot). The viewer is only able to connect the logic of the CONTAINER schema metaphorically to the concept of a visual field (and thus attribute a subjective quality to the second shot) on behalf of the metonymy elicited in the first shot. In other words, without the connection of the character's eyes to the visual content of the second shot, the viewer would not be able to activate the metaphor VISUAL FIELD IS A CONTAINER. The shot would have remained objective rather than subjective. Thus the POV shot provides us with an obvious, albeit enlightening example of how image schematic logic might be extended for the purpose of expressing an aspect of meaning that pertains to a film's narrative context.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to provide the reader with a theoretical motivation for applying an embodied approach to meaning in film as an alternative to the dominant linguistic one. In applying this approach we were confronted, among others, with the challenge of bridging embodied conceptual structure to the iconic surface of visual representations. Following Arnheim, we sought a solution to this problem in the notion of form. It is through the application of cinematic devices such as framing, editing and camera movement that we argued that films are able to structure the real-world events in such a way as to elicit the ostensive appearance of image schemas. Moreover, if the inferential logic of the image schema, as being manifested in the film, is accompanied by an evocation of a target domain, as dictated by the film's subject matter, this logic might well be extended in order to express the target domain metaphorically. An illustration of this was offered in what is generally considered to be a convention of narrative cinema, the POV shot. This example was held deliberately concise for the sole purpose of illustrating how an embodied view of meaning might be applied to film. Given the dynamic nature of image schemas, their potential for interaction, and the creative richness of both narrative and visual style, one might well imagine the opportunities such an approach offers for scholars engaged in the study of meaning in cinema.

End Notes

- 1 This is very close in spirit to what Paisley Livingston refers to as “the meshing condition”: “the intention to mean q by saying or otherwise representing p is successful just in case the intention to imply q meshes sufficiently with what is written, spoken, or otherwise put on display” (99).
- 2 Later in this article, when clarifying the notion of embodied cognition, the concept of “container” will be identified as a prototypical example of what Lakoff and Johnson term an “image schema”, that is, a dynamic and recurrent pattern of sensory-motor experience. From this perspective ENTRY and EXIT designate two “dynamic patterns of containment” (see also Dewell).
- 3 In some cases it seems justified to attribute the conceptual structure to a well-defined person. For instance, when the filmmaker is the sole maker of the film or when the filmmaker maintains “a high degree of control in the sense of decision-making authority and responsibility with regard to the making and overall design of the work” (Livingston 72). A film director that immediately comes to mind in this regard is Stanley Kubrick.
- 4 For good reflective discussions of the relationship between film and language, see, among others, Buckland (“Film Semiotics”), Prince (“The Discourse”), Pryluck and Stam.
- 5 The same observation can be made with regard to music. As Johnson writes: “According to the MUSIC AS LANGUAGE metaphor, passages in music are conceived as sentences, with individual notes or clusters of notes taken to be the equivalent of words. This metaphor thus gives rise to terms like *musical ideas*, *musical sentences*, *propositions*, *punctuation*, *musical questions*, and other quasi-linguistic phrases” (“The Meaning” 235).
- 6 For a short summary of Carroll’s and Currie’s critiques, see Sinnerbrink (24-27).
- 7 It should be stressed that Arnheim himself was rather sceptical about bringing his model for analysing compositional patterns in static media to the analysis of films. He held that film was more restricted than other arts. As to the reason why, the author refers to the fundamental difference in viewing experience that exists between static media such as a painting and mobile media such as film (“The Power of the Center” 214). Narrative cinema deals with a rapid flow of images and an emphasis on character engagement that at first sight seems to impede the kind of absorbed contemplation that characterises our visual experience of a painting’s composition. Arnheim (“Film as Art” 7) believed that when we are engaged in a filmic experience, we can only “react to the brutal signals of immediate satisfaction”. In such a setting our eyes and ears are prevented from perceiving structures, which are critical for perceiving meaning. Although there is no doubt a certain truth in what Arnheim writes, the gap between his gestalt approach and film studies may be smaller than his words seem to suggest. For theoretical support of this claim, see Higgins.
- 8 Branigan suggests something similar when he writes: “Container schemata variously structure our thinking within the 15 domains of framing in film. Although every frame encloses like a “container,” what is “inside” (the contents) and the nature of the “enclosure” (the criteria for the containing thing) are different for each of the 15 domains. The manner in which a container schema is applied to a domain will determine how inferences are drawn and conjectures made about what is framed” (121).
- 9 Searle (“Seeing” 4) refers to this commonsensical definition of a visual field as the *objective visual field*. He distinguishes it from what he calls the *subjective visual field*, that area of visual consciousness in front of your face that one experiences when closing your eyes. As he states, in the former “everything is seen or can be seen, whereas in the latter “nothing is seen nor can be seen”. This characterization of the visual field, coming from the philosophical tradition of conceptual analysis, differs fundamentally from the conception offered by such neuroscientists as

- Smythies who defines the visual field more ambiguously as “the spatial array of visual sensations available to observation in introspectionist psychological experiments” (369). The difference in definition thus reflects the intellectual divide between direct realism and representationalism.
- 10 Metonymy, unlike metaphor, is not defined in terms of cross-domain mappings. Instead, it is defined by mappings within a single domain in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle (e.g., the eyes) provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target (e.g., seeing). For a good discussion of this mechanism, see Radden and Kövecses.
- 11 Underlying this connection between two shots is the link image schema. For a discussion, see Johnson (“The Body” 117-119).

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