

ΣΟΦΙΑ—SOPHIA

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18634/sophiaj.15v.1i.907>

Learning of two semiotic concepts for film analysis

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Article information

Received: October 12, 2018
Revised: December 20, 2018
Accepted: January 15, 2019

How to cite:

Fernández, M.F., Gutiérrez, A.T.,
Arias, D. (2019) Learning of two
semiotic concepts for film analysis.
Sophia, 15 (1): 109-118.

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ISSN (electronic): 2346-0806 ISSN (Print): 1794-8932



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Abstract

Semiotics is the science that studies the systems of communication in the social environment, and it does so through the analysis of the properties of the systems of signs as the basis for the understanding of all human activity. In that sense, the objective of this text is to present a semiotic analysis of the short film *El más fuerte* (The Strongest one), which belongs to the film *Relatos salvajes* (Wild stories), from the year 2014. Two concepts are used for this purpose: ocularization and auricularization, with which the sceneteller (*cinerrador*), through the choice of shots, angles, musicalization, time, among others, tells a story. In order to achieve this purpose, we resorted to the proposal of Gaudreault and Jost (1995) and that of Paz (2001). For them, cinema allows new ways of hearing, seeing, feeling and thinking, because it requires multiple modes for the elaboration of its meaning. As for the findings, the marked use of ocularization and zero auricularization in this cinematographic product stands out. In addition, it is concluded with a small reflection about the possibility of taking these analytical exercises to the classrooms of basic secondary education.

Keywords: Semiology, education, pedagogy, cinema, short film.

Introduction

The cinema is a medium to which most people have access, therefore the interest arises to carry out an analysis that allows to discover some of its aesthetic aspects, that fulfill a specific function and once identified it makes possible to know its communicative intention. The semiotics of cinema has carried out research on this subject that allows us to visualize in the cinema an alternative narrator to the traditional one, a sceneteller (*cinerrador*), that is to say, the camera (the angles) and the musicality as an extralinguistic factor that participates actively in the development of the plot. This is identified in the film "*El más fuerte*" of the film *Relatos salvajes*, in which the narrator is constructed from the stylistic resources of the director (Szifron, 2014)

These concepts, brought to the classroom, give students a broader perspective on the factors that influence discourse, as well as how extralinguistic aspects interact directly with content to direct the speaker's communicative intention. In accordance with this, we will now explain the way in which the traditional concept of the narrator (a voice that narrates) has been overcome by the sceneteller who collects all the elements present in the communicative act in order to construct meaning; once the concepts have been explained, they are applied to the film "*El más fuerte*" which is mainly narrated by the lens, since dialogues are very scarce; and finally, we will point out the usefulness of this in the classroom in order to identify and interpret the various components that direct the communicative acts for their construction of meaning.

The importance of seeing in Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver* and David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*

In this section we present two examples of studies of the semiotics of the film. The first one was made by Damián Andrei (2009) to the film *Wild at Heart* by David Lynch; the second one was made by María Inés Mendoza (2013) in the article "Los espacios de /ver/ en *Volver*".

Andrei's work (2009) aims to reveal the discursive operations that characterize the enunciation of a film and the strategies used for the construction of meaning; to do so, he took as a reference Gianfranco Bettetini's (1984) *audiovisual conversation*. Based on this work, Andrei approached the narrator subject through the notion of a commentary index, which consists of identifying the privileged elements in the development of the film, the marks of enunciation and the effects that these marks imply.

The concepts of ocularization, auricularization and focusing, proposed by Jost and Gaudreault (1995), were also used. Based on these concepts, it is interesting to see how images in cinema are more important than the story told by the characters; in other words, how the image itself tells the story.

From this analysis we conclude that the sceneteller is present in the development of the film, since the elements chosen as stylistic resources (zero ocularization) simulate throughout the film that the character is not captured by the camera, thus giving it a strong sense of reality.

As for Mendoza's work (2013), it is proposed to identify the topic of death from how different codes are used to give meaning to the development of history, based on the concept of point of view (focus) that can be attributed to the speaker. Consequently, the film is recognized as text, with the peculiarity of combining the image band (photographic images that are mobile and sequenced in a certain way) with the soundtrack, which is the mixture of sounds (music, dialogues, monologues).

From the analysis of these filmic dimensions, one can see how the author's style dominates the construction and the mode chosen for the development of the story.

This document concludes that identifying these aspects allows us to reveal that in the case of the filmic discourse with the sceneteller, it can only be reconstructed from the chosen frame:

The angle of the shot refers to that subject of doing that we call the *enunciator* and, at the same time, the perspective thus chosen is obviously a function of that other actor who is the enunciator; but neither of those two actors is directly identifiable in the development of the film [our translation] (Courtés, cited by Mendoza, 2013: 85).

That is to say, the enunciator manipulates the speaker to adhere to the discourse by the interpretative act that he or she performs.

Significance from the use of film tools

As it can be observed in the two mentioned antecedents, notions such as sceneteller, ocularization and auricularization are fundamental to understand how sense is elaborated in cinema.

For this reason, these concepts are defined below and then applied to the analysis of the short film *El más fuerte*.

First, the sceneteller suggests a "voice" that tells, that drives the story within the film; however, it cannot be just a voice given the diverse material that the films are made of. For Paz Gago (2001: 376), the sceneteller implies: "Telling something through images filmed, sequenced and mounted in a certain way". This category dialogues with and is adapted from proposals of literary analysis in which the multiple forms of narration within written fictions are valued. And since written and audiovisual narration are composed of different raw material, it is undeniable that the way of narrating in cinema will have its own particularities and resources.

This perspective on cinema departs from the studies of traditional semiotics, since it recognizes the futility of comparing cinema with language as a system (old semiotic custom); by the way, Paz Gago (2001: 373) states: "Contrary to languages, film shots and sequences do not lend themselves to any paradigmatic or syntagmatic systematization" [our translation].

Secondly, in terms of ocularization, this notion indicates that the film text is the union of indexical, iconic and symbolic sign systems (verbal, visual or auditory) that allow the development of specific codes whose purpose is to load the image with movement, thus endowing it with strong narrative capacity. Ocularization is the visual focus or visual point of view that the film presents and that influences the development of the story (see Jost and Gaudreault, 1995: 140). There we find:

Primary Internal Ocularization: Primary Internal Ocularization: It is how the character sees (if he is drunk, drugged, one-eyed, etc.). It is to follow his gaze without having to show it; the one who sees is absent from the image.

Secondary Internal Ocularization: Secondary Internal Ocularization: Consists of the subjectivity of the image constructed by the raccords, for example, the plane against plane. It shows the context of the scenario where the events are going to happen.

Zero ocularization: It is the plane that refers to a great imaginer. The scene is shown trying to make the presence of the camera be forgotten; the position or movement of the camera can underline the autonomy of the narrator in relation to the characters; the position of the camera can refer beyond its narrative role, a stylistic choice.

According to these possibilities of ocularization, it is inferred that this implies the way in which the visual elements are executed in the film, that is, the choice of shots and sequences that generates connections with the story and the position of the viewer (González, 2012)

Finally, auricularization indicates a sound point of view through the use made of noise, music, speech, etc. The sound is related to the image on the screen. "The filmic sound floats in the projection space" (Odin, cit. by Gaudreault and Jost 1995: 145 [our translation]). In some cases we hear without seeing the origin of the sound. As for auricularization, Jost and Gaudreault (1995: 146-147) propose the following tripartite:

Secondary Internal Auricularization: The restriction of the ear to what is heard is constructed by visual representation, the visual signals allow the construction of an auricular point of view.

Primary Internal Auricularization: A sound refers to a non-visible instance, only when certain deformations of the sound construct a particular listening is it indicative of a change in the narrative level.

Zero Auricularization: It is when the sound of the film, like the intensity of the soundtrack of one of the scenes, is subjected to variations according to the distance of the characters or when the music is omitted to give space to the dialogues and is referred to the implicit narrator.

The way sound and image are manipulated in the cinema determines the different points of view (sound and visual) and in turn defines the sceneteller. And it is through these resources, through their modulations, that the senses and expectations of the spectator are captured and affected while watching.

Animal Behavior under the Lens of Damien Szifron in *Relatos Salvajes*

Relatos salvajes is an Argentine film directed by Damián Szifrón in 2014, composed of six stories entitled: *Pasternak*, *Las ratas*, *El más fuerte*, *Bombita*, *La propuesta* and *Hasta que la muerte nos separe*; all of them intense and with a particular and exquisite black humor that reflects animal behavior in defense of human feelings. In them, each character is taken to the limit and forced to react in a brutal way to situations that attack their dignity and their emotional being. Finally, the film shows how the extreme reactions that occur in the course of each story, is producing grace in who sees it, by exhibiting the death, violence, revenge, in other words, the chaos as such, unfolding naturally that tests the ability of man to defend himself, to survive.

Relatos Salvajes was nominated for Best Foreign Film at the 2015 Oscars and for 52 other awards, including Best Art Direction at the Premios Sur in 2014, Best Film at the Premios Forqué in 2015, and Best Original Screenplay at the Círculo de Escritores Cinematográficos in 2015. It won Best Film and Best Director at the Sur Awards in 2014, Best Latin American Feature Film at the Forqué Awards in 2015 and Best Non-English Film at Bafta in 2016.

El más fuerte is the fight between two men whose origin is the discourtesy of Mario (clearly a lower class man) who makes it difficult for Diego to pass with his car, who drives a luxurious Audi and, the latter, after passing Mario after several attempts, makes an obscene gesture, similar to saying “fuck you” from his window. Diego quietly continued on his way until the rear tire of his car got a flat near a bridge. He got out of his vehicle, looked at the tire and called for help. While waiting for the tow truck, he decided to get the tools out and work it out on his own. While he’s at it, he watches in the distance, behind a cloud of dust, as Mario approaches in his car. Diego gets scared and locks himself in his Audi. Mario parks himself in front of Diego's car and decides to take revenge for the previous insult. From that moment on, a brutal struggle begins, a chain of aggressions by part and part that finally leads to the death of both.

In the development of this short film, the concepts defined in Section 2 provide a semiotic reading in which the sceneteller becomes evident in the different treatments that the film's creator applies to the sound and visual material of his work. This treatment is reflected in the following frames:

Image 1. Opening of the film. (Minute 21:23).



The selected frames for the conceptual analysis, are extracted from the film "The Strongest" that goes from the minute 20: 34 - 38: 49, of the film *Relatos Salvajes*.

In this image, zero ocularization is present, since the view is proposed from the lower front part of Diego's car. You see a quiet road, a nice landscape and a car further down the curve. The point of view is not that of the driver, but of the camera that puts the viewer in context. The frame is from the beginning of the short film. The music that accompanies this opening is by Helen St. John: Love the me from flash dance, a soft song that communicates tranquility, compatible with the beautiful landscape and the road that Diego enjoys at the beginning of the film.

Image 2. Diego passes Mario's car (Minute 22:25).



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

In the scene in Image 2, a joint shot is used that suggests a zero ocularization, in which the cars are seen as a representation of the socio-economic level of the characters and an insult made by Diego after having passed Mario. It is a camera point of view, not someone who is seeing this inside the film. It is also evident that there is zero auricularization, since, while Diego moves away from Mario, the initial music takes on the atmosphere of the film; that is to say, the music does not refer to sounds within the fiction, the facts, but rather, it is music that comes from outside.

Image 3. The flat tire. (Minute 23:20)



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

In this frame a detailed shot is observed that allows the viewer to see the flat tire, which being the main focus of the shot makes it representative for the short film and refers to a zero ocularization, in which the autonomy

of the sceneteller is shown and it can be observed that the rear tire of Diego's car gets a flat tire right near the bridge that will later be the scene of the development and outcome of this story. The sound of the car in movement takes center stage and one can hear its contact with the sand on the ground where Diego decides to pull over. The sound decreases until the car stops, which gives rise to a secondary internal auricularization; that is, when the sound is constructed or product of the visual representation (it originates from the interior of the diegesis).

Image 4. Diego at the bridge. (Minute 23:33).



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

In the frame of Image 4 a zero ocularization is identified, thanks to the use of a large general shot, which allows to see the complete scenario in which Diego is stopped due to the inconvenience with his tire (Diego is seen next to his car at one end of the bridge). This image confirms that: "A single shot may not communicate anything. However, if we put it in the context of the rest of the shots, it will acquire a meaning beyond what it shows" (Viarengo, 2001:45). In other words, this image takes on greater importance throughout the film since it is there that the story develops and unravels. This ocularization (point of view) acquires greater semantic relevance since it is accompanied by a zero auricularization; in other words, the moving image is joined to a sharp sound (which generates tension) alien to the character. The intensity of the sound rises as the camera zooms in on Diego. Suddenly the sound is cut off when Diego is shown, in another shot, opening the trunk door of his Audi.

Image 5. Stone to water. (Minute 24:44)



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

In Image 5 a whole shot shows Diego kicking a pebble that is about to fall into the river. He does this while calling a tow truck to help him with his car. Here is a secondary internal ocularization, as Diego is seen standing in front of the descent to the river and looking into it. As he moves forward you can hear the sound of his cell phone keypad, his footsteps in the sand, and you can also hear the stone being kicked, plus the sound of it falling into the water. What happens then, is that the enunciated ocularization is combined with a primary internal auricularization, that is to say, sounds that are mixed with the image we see, but of which we do not explicitly see their origin, we simply assume them.

What happens in the frames of images 4 and 5 shows how in the cinema there are multiple resources, different from the literary, to give meaning to the story narrated in images, to capture the attention of the spectator through the ways in which image and sounds are treated by the filmmaker.

Image 6. Prelude to a misfortune. (Minute 25:44 - 26:15)



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

It is important to see these three scenes together because their sequence indicates an increase in narrative tension, in the expectation of the viewer; they are also the announcement of a narrative turn. From this moment on, a wild confrontation begins between the two characters in this story. In the frames presented, a zero ocularization is identified, since the angles used show Diego from a different perspective, as if he were being observed by someone else and the camera was not there.

No one knows who is observing. The first frame shows Diego trying to solve the problem himself, but we see him through some bushes, as if someone were spying on him. In the next image something quite significant happens: a cloud of dust rises. You no longer see Diego through the bushes, but you see a cloud of dust coming towards him and taking away the visibility of the road.

It seems that the sceneteller reports that the action is approaching. In this fragment of the film the viewer is aware that something intense is going to happen soon, but Diego doesn't know it. The dust cloud could be a normal event given the conditions of the site (zero focalization); however, these images are accompanied by a secondary internal auricularization, since the sound mixed with the images comes from Diego's activity (attempt to change the tire), from the wind and the branches that it shakes in its path. This mixture of sounds and images produces an upward tension that materializes with the arrival of Mario in his car and reveals that the dust cloud was actually an advertisement (a symbolic and intentional event created by the film's author).

When Diego sees Mario approaching, he takes refuge inside his car. It is evident that he is afraid of Mario. He parks in front of the Audi, gets out of his car and begins to attack Diego's car. From the outside, he challenges him, destroys his windshield wipers and hits the windshield. At this point, one can see how Diego slowly transforms himself, as fear begins to leave him. The conclusion of the aggressions materializes when Mario urinates and defecates on the Audi. From that moment on we discover a new Diego, his wild version

Image 7. Aggression and transformation. (Minute 29:45 - 30:51).



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

In the first two frames of Image 7 one can see Diego's gesture of displeasure, his face can be seen in the rearview mirror and he turns around and does not see Mario urinating and defecating on his car. These last two acts by Mario, more than physically attacking him, hurt his ego, his dignity. The angles of the images propose the facts from Diego's point of view. The first is natural, and the second is a counterpoint. This situation, more than the previous ones, unleashes the struggle of "el más fuerte" (the strongest one).

The next two pictures in Image 7 highlight (or focus on) first, the broken windshield and Diego is seen in the background, blurred; second, Diego is seen with a resolving attitude and the windshield is blurred. You notice this different character, you hear his heavy breathing (secondary internal auricularization), and you notice a narrative change in which the roles are reversed. We see the wounded man in the depths of his being; we do not see him from Mario's point of view, but rather from the perspective of the one who builds the character (zero ocularization). Thus, the spectator knows about the change made in Diego, but Mario does not know this transformation (he does not know what is coming). The broken windshield coincides, moreover, with something that in the personality of the Audi driver was broken.

Image 8. The final battle. (Minute 33:38 - 34:54).



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

Image 8, first frame, is a general shot (zero ocularization) showing how due to the tire incident, Diego ends up falling on Mario's car. In the second frame a counter plane is used (secondary internal ocularization) in which, inside the destroyed vehicles, the characters continue irreversibly the confrontation. We can see how Diego, in a detailed shot, takes a fire extinguisher as a weapon to defend himself from Mario. Then he hits him with it and its contents are released (in Image 9 you can see Mario surrounded by the gas from the fire extinguisher). In the development of Image 8, first frame, there is a secondary internal auricularization, in which the sounds are the response to what is seen; that is to say, to the blows they give and receive. In the next frame, there is a primary internal auricularization, because in the fight they turn on the radio and music sounds that is not directly related to what happens, but rather is opposite to what is seen.

Image 9. Last moments. (Minute 35:54).



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

Image 9 is consistent with a primary internal ocularization, since it makes use of a close-up, in which Mario is visualized (from Diego's gaze) with a strong and determined expression; his expression is also allusive to the feelings of both: neither will leave without completely destroying the other. The gas that came out of the fire extinguisher and the gesture on Mario's bloody face are a sign that only one can be "the strongest".

Image 10. A hug for the end. (Minute 37:17 - 38:47).



Source: *Relatos Salvajes*

The general shot of frame 1, image 10, shows Diego's car without its rear tire from the outside (zero ocularization), Mario setting fire to a rag he has placed in the gasoline compartment. We see this scene not from the viewpoint of one of the characters in the diegesis, but, on the contrary, from the outside, as well-to-do spectators or spectators accustomed to a form of display proposed by the director. Instead of seeing the facts from this plane, they could have been presented at a sharp or counterclockwise angle, in a large frame, at a broken angle, etc.

The last scene, the second frame, is really significant, since it is the living part of the exquisite black humor that the director of this film handles. The blind struggle in which Diego and Mario faced each other led them to death. It started on the road, with an obscene gesticulation and some strong words; then, it moved to their cars, used as weapons and as trenches for the shelter.

But also, inside one of them, Diego's Audi, the final battle took place between these two men. There they ended up together, embraced and charred. This is how we see them thanks to the camera that slowly approaches: two expressionless embers abandoned in an embrace. The camera shows them and, meanwhile, we can hear the dialogues of two agents who have come to the scene of the incident; we hear their voices (secondary internal auricularization) which point out, absurdly, that it could have been a crime of passion. Later, when the camera comes closer to the victims, the voice of the agents is left out and a sharp rising sound emerges that has been present throughout the film and that, on numerous occasions, has contributed to the viewer knowing, in part, what is going to happen. The short film ends like this, with a zero auricularization.

On several occasions in the film, as in this last example, the conventionality of the signs automatically refers to an unconscious and stereotyped interpretation. The agents who arrive at the site take as their main hypothesis (because they are "embraced" by Mario and Diego) that it was a crime of passion and do not consider a possible fight, what happened. Something similar happens when Mario, before the denouement, is confronting Diego and a truck passes by their side, to which Diego, from his Audi, whistles desperately for help. But Mario, pretending not to notice, raises his hand towards the driver of the vehicle as a sign of greeting. A sign of help, Diego's, and another of "greeting", Mario's. Whoever drives and sees them relates this, Mario's gesture and Diego's car's whistle, to a greeting. Then, he also responds by beeping; that is, it corresponds to the supposed greeting.

Conclusion

Succinctly, as it could be observed in the analysis of the film, the use of ocularization and auricularization results in the sceneteller, which is built from the choice and combination of visual and auditory resources that provide the viewer with a more intense approach to what happens in the story. Thus, the image and its movement are given a meaning that makes the narration more dynamic. The movement of the image is what allows the narrator to no longer be just "a voice that tells something" as Genette initially proposed (quoted by Paz Gago, 2001: 376), but that the story can be told through simple images and even implicitly include the spectator in the development of the plot.

Likewise, in the analysis of the selected scenes, the short film, in a high proportion, has a sceneteller external to the diegesis (zero ocularization), thus it is reflected in most of the frames, granting autonomy to the narrator. This is evident in Image 6, when the camera seems to be spying on Diego while he is changing the tire and the dust rises announcing that another vehicle is approaching (which moments later appears in the image). This visual fragment is complemented by a secondary internal auricularization, which indicates that what is heard is constructed by what is seen. It is also visualized in Image 7, which has a zero ocularization and indicates Mario's acts that modify Diego's initial peaceful attitude, awakening in him his animal behavior to defend his "pride".

The zero ocularization that is marked throughout the film, evidences the intention of the director in this short film (in which there are few dialogues) to build an autonomous sceneteller, which directly involves the viewer. This is achieved thanks to the presence of intentional symbolic details that, materialized in moving images, anticipate future actions that the characters are unaware of. In the case of auricularization, with its respective variations (sounds whose origin is traced to the interior of the diegesis or that come from outside it), it is used as in Image 8 to create humorous effects on the spectator. For example, when in the middle of a fight the radio in Diego's car is turned on and a song is played whose quiet tone does not match the wild tone of the fight between them. Image 10 reveals another humorous or ironic effect when the crane arrives and a romantic song is heard inside, which, by chance, coincides with the explosion that ends the fight between the two protagonists.

The concepts mentioned above work together, and the choice of these directly affects what the scene wants to show, because if one of these images were to have its shot or music changed, its meaning would be completely modified and the sceneteller would propose another intention.

Learning these concepts of semiotics can be used in other pedagogical processes, since "the concept of the sceneteller makes it easier to understand the enunciation that is produced after the observation of the space" (Gómez, 1997: 71). Therefore, it is important to identify the different resources used in the community acts and also the ways in which these are presented according to the appreciations that the author wants the addressee to perceive.

The concepts mentioned in the present article, taken to the classrooms of basic secondary education, can enable students to recognize how extralinguistic aspects influence the intention of the discourses, in the construction of their meaning, since "the intellectual and human maturation that is intended as the final objective in high school, depends to a great extent on the development in the student of his or her capacity to understand and analyze audiovisual discourses" (Alonso, 2002: 108). Here they were approached from the cinema perspective, but they also serve as an interpretive instrument of literary discourses (in them we trace their origin), of advertising spots, political discourses, and all those present in the massmedia.

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