

# Reassembling Film Interpretation: Using Technique, Technology and Film Sciences in a Latin American Context

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## Abstract

Cinematic interpretation requires input from the *praxis* of film making, and involves extensive and slow understanding of artistic parameters like colorimetry, color cognition, editing and cinematography. These technical aspects may be extracted from knowledge of contemporary digital media that are commonly intrapolated into films. Technological media and its applications clarify how semantic units are generated and processed for understanding the kinetic effects of films. Filmic *praxis* affects communication of “story”, creating the best opportunity for insight into the *weltanschauung* of the media.

**Keywords:** cinematography, synergised interpretation, film *praxis*

## ALTERNATIVES IN FILM CRITICISM

The human need to communicate has lead to the development of various types of languages: these are taxonomically identified in media studies as verbal, written, and print (Carpenter and McLuhan 1956). Based on more research done on the premises of the new wave media theory we propose “kinesic” language; this may be considered as an important phase in that chronological sequence. Changes in massive communicative methods have in turn invited us to adapt to certain challenges. With the arrival of the cinema a language of its own was developed, which in addition to using the spoken and written words, required understanding of other elements that configured the story: these elements are image, sound and sequence, all of which have also been discretely dicussed in the literature (Metz 2011).

Theories of cinema that emerged in the late nineteenth century and in the first two decades of the twentieth, sought an aesthetic legitimation of a philosophical nature. In the theories of the middle of the century (1940-1960) cinema was the object of study in areas of social sciences and humanities, with realism and formalism emerging thereafter from traditions associated with literary and art criticism. Already in the last decades of the century (1960-1980), film studios were institutionalized for the academy. Only finally, at the beginning of the 21st century, film studies are becoming interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary (Zavala, 2005). Furthermore, due to the great latent film production in the world and the lack of current analysis methodologies or instruments, the need arises to build a critical instrument that allows films to be analyzed in isolation. It is necessary to provide a semiotic and narrative interpretation of the elements that give structure to film. Furthermore, due to the great amount of impactful film production in the world and the lack of analytical methodologies or instruments, the need to build an adequate critical instrument

always arises so that it allows films to be analyzed in isolation. Cinema constructs a new language in the artistic disciplines which as such, is a language or voice of its own, and that transmits a message: an idea or an emotion for the recipient, making it necessary for the media to establish itself as a language that takes upon itself to spread across a set of viewers or communicants, and therefore ensure successful reflexes between its recipient and the film-maker (Jaime, 2000). Consequently, cinema is a narrative tool that induces and evokes emotion and indeed also semantically transcend new realities that are configured by the director.

All this is brought to scrutiny since cinematic interpretation requires specific techniques that must be effectively put into practice. Ideas, emotions, feelings, messaging – i.e., the communicative or “semiotic” unit of cinematographic applications - will be perceived far more precisely and start to accord with directorial intentions once the *praxis* makes it perfectly communicable. Filmic *praxis* must be analyzed as a means of communication whose intention is none other than to tell a “story” with all its ambient resonances made available by sensorial and extrasensorial means, so that these elements complement each other in the audio-visual network of a story, creating some kind of *weltanschauung* of thoughts.

It is necessary to contrast this specific corpus of “cinematographic language” with what is called “film narrative”. The study of kinesthetic images involve an understanding of [a] camera movements, [b] frames and [c] color technology for integrating them to aural effects, all of which combine to create a *gestalt* of such elements. In the next sequence music, silence, ambient sound-effects, and its narrative signals create specific sensations in the viewer during narration. Cinema can therefore be understood either as a film narration as had been the traditional critical perspective, in terms of the compositional methods that constitute the story. In the context of Latin America Lauro Zavala, in an essay called "Elements of cinematographic discourse" suggests that the analysis of film makes it necessary not just to engage in a distinction between re-creation, criticism, appreciation, historical analysis but also to negotiate aspects of cinematographic theory (Zavala, 2003). Each of these compositional aspects seek to answer different questions that are simultaneously presented in films, but those that also distinguish them from each other. Cinematographic analysis is a specialized discipline that allows a specific recognition of the distinctive compositional elements of the film, which are not directly linked to value judgments of a social nature and only generate such judgements in their final product. These compositions provide the viewer with a better understanding of film works.

The present study proposes a synergy in the interpretation of films. *This synergistic method of interpretation combines both film 'praxis' and analysis of film narrative. The synergy that is required between these components may be qualitatively suggested - but at some level it may be gauged from quantitative analysis of cognitive effects produced by film technology. This is our brief thesis statement for the paper.* We starts with precepts laid down by Zavala's "Elements of cinematographic discourse" for Latin American film, but it may equally apply to the film genre in general (Zavala 2005). The trajectory of any single semiotic impact in terms of "cinematographic analysis and its methodological diversity" (Zavala, 2005 p.65-69) is worth considering for any filmic context whatsoever but especially Latin America or Mexico or Argentina for instances, where a diversity of techniques have been recommended. The Latin American context has been studied for almost two decades with great success: a consciousness of film making methodologies helps us in re-constructing a brilliant recent film like *Roma* (2018), produced and directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Such foundational methodological studies as *Analysis of the filmic text* (Gómez, 2010), *The language of cinema* (Martín, 1995), *Analysis of film* (Aumont, 1996), *How to analyze a film* (Casetti, 1991) and *The Cinematic Story* (Gaudreault, 1990), may be used as a basis for

studying the narrative resources of the film as it evolved in a Latin American context, with its panoply of visuals and construction of characters, color, music, silence *etc.*, all that gives way to the construction of filmic grammar that defines the Latin American sensorial world. Similarly, even earlier Greimas Algirdas Julien's "Structural semantics" (Greimas, 1987), Elsa Bettendorff and Raquel Prestigiacomo in "Audiovisual story" (Bettendorff, 2002), Juan José Igartua with his critical work "Persuasive narrative" (Igartua, 2007), and finally Oscar Landi, "Devorame otra vez" (Landi, 1992) allows us to understand the importance of audiovisual narrative elements in conjunction, as a repertoire of views on film-making. But it is really after Zavala that Latin American critique comes into play and is seen to be more relevant to that context.

### LIGHT AND VISUAL EFFECTS

We note that visual and sonic language could be studied further in the framework of proposals by more sonic oriented theories of Michael Chion whose study is titled, "La Audiovisión" [in Spanish: trans *Audiovision*] (Chion, 1993), and other like Lattuca and Carly's "The Creative Function of the Camera" (Lattuca, 2002), Lauro Zavala's other work "The Seduction of Light" (Zavala, 2010) and González Serna's website blog discussing "The elements of the filmic image" (González-Serna, n / d). Since the publication of these articles and blogs they have served as a benchmark in the construction of model analysis. Furthermore, analysis is enriched by considering a new series of elements, such as visual and sound planimetry, the construction of the film script, as well as filmic aesthetics and basic principles for the construction of the language of cinema. Cinematography, specifically has been addressed by Mascelli's "The five basic principles of cinematography. Film Editor's Manual" (Mascelli, 1998), Gordon White's "Video Techniques, Official Institute of Radio and Television" (White, 1988), Polverino's "The Manual of the Film Director" (Polverino, 2007), "The screenwriter's manual" (Field, 1996). and Alcañiz's web texts, on "Lighting in cinema as an expressive resource" (Alcañiz, 2007) deal more specifically with cinematography. Investigations (Olaya, 2015) "Analysis of sound resources in Hitchcock films: *Psycho* (1960) and *Frenesí* (1972)" by Olaya Martín Mínguez, and Guillermo García-Montalbán y Campos" Analysis of sound communication in cinema: 5.1 surround sound design" (García-Montalbán, 2014), which deal with the use of sound resources in audiovisual production and the role of sound communication in cinema, where they also describe the use and functions of sound. Works that have made it possible to analyze the elements required during the construction of the film project, which helped establish that, at a representative level, all cinematographic discourses share the same, universally valid methods of construction.

Finally, the articles "About film analysis: the state of things" (Zunzunegui, 2007, p. 51-58) by Santos Zunzunegui, "Film analysis in the multi-screen era" (Marzal, 2007, p. 63 -68) by Javier Marzal Felici, by Enrique Martínez-Salanova "The value of the moving image" (Martínez, 1997, p. 23-35) and "The value of cinema to learn and teach" (Martínez-Salanova, 2003, p. 45-52), by Francisco J. Gómez Tarín "Cinematographic Narrative and Cinema Teaching" (Gómez, 2007, p. 75-80) must be mentioned here as they refer to and discuss the field of cinematography for practicals, that is teaching-learning processes, providing reflections, proposals and analysis for a didactic usage of the media. These last body of practically oriented research and instruction also allow us to outline the use of the cinematographic analysis as an instrument for teaching and analyzing films professionally, for content creators, critics, teachers and literary film viewers who are not generally preoccupied with the medium beyond being consumers of the story. The study of cinematographic theories allows us to have a broader panorama. The proposal for a strictly cinematography oriented analysis addresses much current needs of deconstructing, building and

interpreting the information provided by films. Structural elements such as image and sound are normally analyzed in isolation. But a technique of interpretative analysis may be proposed so as to allow us to determine elements of film praxis and how they facilitate construction and extended symbols of audio-visual nature. It should be mentioned that the properties that govern the analysis of a film have different targeting patterns, so it is not easy to determine a single pattern. The elements of film making grammars allow a study of the intellectual consequences of film shots and sound effects.

That is why any analytical instrument raises questions on the manifested aspects of audiovisual language in cinema., There may be different formats of narrating a story, such as [a] plot, [b] movement and position of camera, [c] the location of shots [d] color combinations [d] the audio, among others of which the most important is [e] editing. Components [a] to [e] converge in the expression of an idea in a deeper way and that, more than anything, provides the viewer with a vivid feeling. Therefore, the instruments seek to necessitate deconstruction or description processes, in which, the film may be broken down into structural features of image or color or sound, which may then again be listed for subsequent arrangement through editing and finally, articulated. In this way we proceed to a second stage, which is that of reconstruction or interpretation, where all aspects of deconstruction are explained and clarified to finally understand all the elements expressed in the prior analysis for a posterior final comprehension of the accentuated and nuanced total effect. Contribution could be thus made to film studies, since this leads us finally to identify, analyze and compare (by quantification and qualification) the signs, symbols and codes that make up the cinematographic language.

## **METHOD IN PRACTICE**

A sample may be used to show how techniques of assembling sounds and image could be played down to confront the plot and to develop the story. Hence first, the discursive methodology used in this project can be considered mixed (Hernández, 2010). It is based on the theoretical basis of using necessary and sufficient sources of information from instruments of film making. A descriptive statement accompanies the understanding of film technicalities, allowing the necessary elements of film analysis to be introduced. An Inductive-Deductive method may be used with respect to particular aspects of the cinematographic process, and also methods of filmic analysis for the understanding of the audiovisual narrative (Lases, 2006). We start with the understanding of what cinema physically is, and the subsequent or accompanying application of the theory of film analysis, narrative construction and film grammar to create an integrated format of interpretive analysis. We could analyze author, year, genre, theme, types of narrator, type of narration, timing of narration, level of narration, character (identity, behavior and qualities), diagnosis of the character, actants, narrative units (distributional and integrators), level of conflict and use of flash, visual elements (planes, color pattern, temperature), sound elements (voice, ambient sound, noise, silence and temporality) and finally, the planimetric percentage (short, medium, long, complementary). It is worth mentioning that this analytical model not only identifies the structural and compositional elements of each exposed film, but also quantifies and qualifies the indicators, facilitating disaggregation of these individual elements so that they could be built together and in this way a more complete interpretation obtained.

## ANALYSIS

An analysis of instruments is thus used to understand a Latin American film like Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2019). First, the film *Roma* in fact, reminds us mostly of the classics of Italian *neorealism*, especially films like Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thief* (1948) or Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954). Symbolism is generated by Cuarón simply with techniques such as duration of shots. This is evident not only in the first scene which introduces us to the time sequence of the world which it describes. The reflection of an airplane on the water used to clean the room's floor. This is followed by extraordinarily quotidianism in the representation of family, home, house, amenities and finally the character and their movements achieved with very old style shot compilations and frames which are forgotten in contemporary shot preferences. Then we are reminded of the magnificent rescue scene on the ocean, waves breaking forth creating an overwhelming image of impending death on the liminal horizons of our existence. The long continued shot of the waves from within makes an impelling visual sequence that seems to have few parallels in any cinema. The scene is somewhat reminiscent of the splash of waves in Bergman's introductory shot of the *Death* emblem in *The Seven Seals*, although from a narrative point of view Bergman discarded the neorealist techniques of Italian cinema. This cinematographic tradition of symbolically relevant long shots explains Cuarón's initial 4 minute shot where we only see the reflection on the water used for cleaning the patio floor. As critics have remarked this long shot of an evolving mundane reflection lends itself to various interpretations: the stillness of the water in other scenes in the film, and to situations that recur in the garage, and incidents in the house that demonstrate the brilliant use of subtexts in Cuarón's film. Again, Cuarón's normal style in other Hollywood blockbusters like *Gravity* (2013), are not of much use here.

Another synthetic element involving image and story is in the fact that a portentous display of image and photography goes parallel with the story. The film does not refrain from using sensitive elements throughout but that is not where the strength of the film lies. Cuarón's *Roma* which went on to win the Oscar for cinematography has been rightly judged as a film of a sequence of humane and intricate murals executed in a neorealist style and with detached photographic observations of life without any kind of open moralistic evaluation. From the point of view of style Cuarón is best understood as a joiner or organizer of visual shots made through compilations, angles, fields of view and dolly movements among other perspective or points of view revelations. This is unusual for a contemporary film. It also creates a disturbing unexpectedness with its black and white messaging. Its shot-sequences and the binary visuality are clear examples of elegant, sober and detailed photography. The film was made from a planning that used panning, frame, long shots showing interiors, postcards and objects that the viewer's eyes capture in terms of a historically locked sequence of events. A dramatic film with less syntagmatic density would have avoided basic information about Mexico in the sixties and seventies which Cuarón makes a staple for the audience. The transportation in time is achieved with not just neorealist effects but also with painting like sequences of incidents which remind the audience of a certain time and place and the perpetrators of that history.

Any film-maker might have lost a lot in the interpretation of signs that he or she displayed with intense detail and care. There are elements of the plot that interrupt the eloquence of the images, because of having framed them in unlikely situations, or because of having tried to explain them at all costs with unnecessary dialogue; there are complex frames and grandiose camera movements that only serve to embellish tiny actions or impossible coincidences. It is one thing to link the movement of the camera to the emotional or psychological state of the characters, for example, and another very different thing is to use that movement to boast an immense display of scenery,

which has little to tell us about the people who inhabited that world. In *Roma*, the formal aspect and the dramatic aspect, often go their separate ways but do create a singular impact in their totality, by means of a kind of visual aural hypnosis.

## CONCLUSION

We confront cinematographic language with film narrative here since it is from the visual and sound factors that the necessary environment for symbolism develops. This is the empirical reality for the film experience -no matter how philosophically inclined our process of interpretation is. To push the characters to the limit, making the viewer understand the character psychology, all depend on this total or mixed method scenario of film viewing. We were able to observe that it is possible to establish a model of cinematographic analysis that integrates structural and audiovisual characteristics necessary for a film product such as is evident in Cuarón's *Roma*. The Latin American context projects detail and success in recreation of an era and a place that no longer exists as a physical entity but only as memory. Mexico City has evolved beyond recognition, at least in several cases that are found in the film. In such a model the typifications of narrative reality includes a detailed attention to temporality and quantification of visual planes, access to sensations of color or temperature, and a psychological conjecture of each character. It is possible to establish compositional principles for *Roma* and apply the said analysis to interpretations. Cinema (Fiction and Documentary), Animation, Video clip and Videogames, since they allow us to isolate audio visual effects also help us retroactively to reassemble those elements identifying the ethic that guides a film in its imagined world. In addition, performing the analysis of any film is therefore known now to be an interdisciplinary task, since it requires integration of criteria from various disciplines: it includes filmic grammar, psychological profile of characters, and determining factors that come from technology and re-inforce character, society, economy, culture and psychology among other things.

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### Film Consulted

ROMA Alfonso Cuarón