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Cinema and Pragmatism: a Reflection on the Signic Genesis in Cinematographic Art

Abstract:
This article aims to discuss the importance and urgency of Charles S. Peirce's philosophy to understand the creative genesis of movie making. This is a reflection on the ontology and possible cinematographic epistemology through Peircean semiotics. Methodologically, we discuss the phenomenology of the Metropolis as a fulcrum for the development of a language and of an aesthetics such as the aesthetic dimension possible to be achieved within the language of cinema, by observing the hybrid character of such communication and the behavior of the movie makers in relation to those particular possibilities of aesthetics, and by emphasizing the importance of pragmatism in the materalization of a movie through a triadic thought, from the imaginary ideal at first, the try out of possibilities as a second stage, towards a definition of the idea, to the externalization and development of a movie as language. This triad has the Peircean categories – Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness – as its conceptual ground, and yet keeps many correspondences with the poetics of Aristotle, allowing, thus, a reflection between Peirce and the great Greek philosopher.

Keywords: Semiotics, Pragmatism, Cinema, Epistemology, Phenomenology

Introduction

According to Peirce, all knowledge comes from perception. It is through such mediation of reality that we develop language, in an understanding and learning process about the surrounding world. This Peircean principle helps us understand the new perceptive paradigm brought about by movies. The reality of the metropolis at the end of the XIX century inaugurates that which Kienzl denominated “cinematographic soul” (Kienzl apud Singer, 116). Before the advent of the metropolis, the forms of interaction and mediation had a time and a rhythm that was far more contemplative in relation to the one of this new environment. They were characterized by the seasonal periods, related to the production in the fields. In the big cities, on the other hand, this rhythm was dictated by the industries and by the circulation of merchandize. As Georg

Simmel highlights: “The modern vision of life is founded upon money, whose nature is fluctuating and which presents the identity of the essence in the biggest and most exchangeable variety of equivalents.” (Simmel apud Gunning, 36).

This exchangeable variety of equivalents and the fluctuating nature of money that Simmel points out, end up impregnating and consolidating the phenomena of modern life. The mixture and the promiscuity of these promote a revolution in the forms of mediation in big cities. This new historical moment announces the importance of perceptive attention, for it was no longer possible to assimilate all the reality of the surrounding while walking through the metropolis. It was necessary to focus and cut and reconstruct - in the mind - a synthesis of that world, in a fast manner, even to guarantee one’s survival once the risk of being literally run over was at stake, whether by the crowd or by the street-cars, cars or trains.

Faced with this markedly visual environment, the mind had to learn how to select the stimuli, to cut them and assemble them, giving them unity, in search of quick interpretations, in answers embodied in actions in the quotidian of the metropolis. By observing these aspects of the metropolis, it is quite clear why language is not in the mind, but the mind is in language, as Peirce says. It is thus due to the characteristics of the cinematograph, to the form its operationality is constituted and to the ontological characteristics of the metropolitan reality that it is possible to understand the ontology of the movies in the following characteristics:

1) Signic promiscuity (open to blending of languages and arts);

2) Fragmentation;

3) Movement and ordering of signic fragments producing a hybrid language.

Peirce’s pragmatism can help us reflect upon the thought responsible for the construction of the cinematographic sign, an eminently iconic one, when we consider its building process. The aimed esthetic ideality, the diagrammatic

thought, which relates languages that compose it, and the concept, which moulds the making of the film, presuppose the passage from the Inner World of feeling and of thought to the Outer World of action. Those elements that lead to the making of the cinematographic sign correspond to a process that the diagrammatic thought may evince.

> "What is a movie, in the beginning? A suspicion, a hypothetic story, a shadow of ideas, blurred feelings. And, still, [from that] first impalpable contact, it already seems to be itself, complete, vital, pure." (Fellini, 204 and 205)

The film has to leave the state of pure conjecture and possibility so as to become something that in fact exists, so as to be made and face all the difficulties inherent to the movement of ideas that go from the Inner World to something palpable in the Outer World. This movement is woven in three distinct stages, corresponding to the Peircean Categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness.

When one proposes a cinematographic work, there is, definitely, a "first," but this is already a resultant of the blend of languages, of an evolution of the sign. The inspiration for a cinematographic work can be infinite; however, when an idea is chosen and circumscribed, it is exposed in a synthetic form. From that syntheses comes the storyline or synopsis, a short-story or an argumentation, in sum, the verbal language outstands. Many times, it is the case of the articulation of symbols, of general ideas. But these general ideas must be suggested in the movie, they circumscribe how the story will be narrated. Thus, the script is the beginning in the production of an audiovisual work, but should not be taken as the firstness of cinematographic thought. The symbol's constituting parts are icons and indexes.

This icon-part is responsible for suggesting the image of the object to which the symbol refers, calling to itself the qualities of that object, while the index-

part indicates to which object the symbol reports.

This script, besides indicating the object to which the symbolic sends, also suggests the visualization (firstness) of the scenes. Through the script we imagine (icon-part) the story that is triggered through pure action, for in movies there are no profound analysis or arguments as are found in literary works. There we only find the description of the scenes, with the aim of visualizing them. The visual is the signic ground, and the written or verbal text is the externalization of that imagined object or, as Fellini says: "The words give birth to other images, deviate the end that the cinematographic imagination pursues." (Fellini, 206)

According to this Italian movie director, the script is:

> [...] the moment in which the movie gets closer and distances itself. The script works like a detective who investigates (hypothesis) what it is or can be. One tries to discover how it can be embodied. The first images appear somewhat confused, contradictory, scoffingly clear, stimulated by nothing (firstness). The images go away: the script must describe them (suggest), but anyway, they have a literary rhythm, and this rhythm is different, incomparable to the cinematographic one." (Fellini, 205)

This first stage is made up of images, sounds, dialogs, scenes, details, which are thought and rethought, thus, are pure visual conjectures of possible stories, a ludic game where abductive thought exerts its function of imagining plots and characters, this logic thought being dictated by the idealized esthetic.

The act of writing the script is already an act of externalizing these ideas, of giving them life. Secondness is in the direct relation of the construction and concretization of this world where the story happens; it is the stage in which the syntax of the languages occurs. Therefore, the syntax is secondness, that is, it constitutes itself in the feasible construction of the movie object, of this world where the story happens, where characters move and which is similar to reality, but it has no commitment with the real, for here creative liberty reigns supreme,

mixing diverse elements (signs) toward an end: the movie.

> "The movie tells its worlds, its stories, its characters, through images. Its expression is figurative, like the one of dreams. (...) The movie tries to reproduce a world, an environment, in a vital manner. It tries to remain in this dimension, trying to recreate the emotion, the enchantment, the surprise." (Fellini, 139 and 154)

This Syntax already has within itself the visual esthetic ground of the movie (firstness), thus, the movie object is woven from this ideality, from this cinematographic imagetic ground. Secondness, in fact, consists in the concretization of the movie, in the stage where inductive thought acts by testing whether the chosen choices are able to compose the idealized scenes, are able to express everything one aims at, it is a stage marked by elements of alterity, of the outer world, which needs to be superseded for the concretization of the work. At the same time, Syntax also refers to the minds involved in the development of the work, many times, each one possessing a distinct formation, from diverse areas, but as a whole, in the production. Its modalities are: the script; the direction of art (form and color, scenario, dressing, make up, objects of the scene, etc.); direction of photography (light, lenses and equipment for illumination); production of audio (direct sound, sound effects and sound track); digital effects (alteration in image, 3-D creation etc.); actors; and, last but not least, the director. Each link of the syntactic web has a triad, each one having three distinct stages, firstness, secondness and thirdness, guided by an esthetic harmony which makes each element fit the whole movie.

In the making of the movie, thirdness is composed of the potential interpretant, by the innumerable possibilities of interpretation. The fiction movie is not concerned with the truth, its characteristic element being its being open to various readings and rereadings, but for that to occur, there is in it this potential character of being able to generate a diversity of interpretations which hover

over the work, which transcends time, never fully deciphered, much on the contrary, always renewing itself, in futuro. The articulation of the syntax of languages which make up the cinematographic sign has the aim of suggesting this or that effect: from one image associated to music, to light, to dressing, with the assemblage, etc. This stage is ruled by deductive thought when it delineates these possibilities of effects, of generating them in the public.

This thought is of the order of the Inner World and is related to abductive thought, by testing, still in the mind, the possible narrative plots of the characters.

It is, therefore, responsible for the decisions in the construction of the Syntax or movie object. This stage works a lot with general ideas and, in the choice of how to suggest these symbolic ideas through the various elements that make up the cinema. So as to illustrate it better, it is worth mentioning a dialog taken from the Interviews Hitchcock gave to Truffaut: “My main pleasure is that the movie acts upon the public, and I made a point it did. In Psycho, the theme is of no importance to me, the characters are of little importance to me, what I am interested in is that assemblage of the fragments of the movie; the photography; the sound track and everything that is purely technical which were able to get screams from the public. I believe that for us it is a great satisfaction to use the cinematographic art to create a mass emotion [...]. What touched the public was the pure movie. [...] the manner the story was built and told, which led the public to react in an emotional manner.” (Truffault, 287)

This triadic idea taken from the Peircean Categories to analyze the construction of the cinematographic sign finds support in Aristotle’s Poetics. In these texts, Aristotle is concerned with the construction of tragedy and epopee, quotes numerous plays and analyzes them critically until he postulates the ways to produce a good tragedy. This way can be revised through the three above-mentioned categories:

“When the poet organizes the fables and completes his work by composing

> the elocution of the characters, he must, as much as possible, go about it as if it happened before his very eyes, for, seeing things fully illuminated, as if they were present, he will find what is convenient, and no minor detail contrary to the effect he intends to produce will escape him." (Aristotle, 63)

This visualization of the scenes as if he saw them before his eyes corresponds to firstness, to abductive thought, trying to find what is convenient, no minor detail of the story escaping him, and already anticipating possible esthetic effects that he intends to produce. As for the Syntax of languages, his commentaries are spread throughout the text in many parts, such as:

> As for the role-playing work, the art of the scenographer has a greater importance than that of the poet. (...) Tragedy consists, therefore, in the imitation of an action and is, above all, through action that it imitates the characters that act. (...) It is not, therefore, for action to imitate characters, but, through the acts, the characters are represented. (...). Without action there is no tragedy (...). It is convenient that the imitation be one and whole and that the parts are so assembled that it would suffice the suppression or displacement of one of them for the whole set to be modified or to get mixed up (...). (Aristotle, pp. 36, 37, 38 and 42)

In these passages, it is quite clear that Aristotle is preoccupied with the syntax of eloquence, chant, role-playing, that is, with the action of tragedy, which can only be produced through the rhythm, language and harmony, employed separately or as a whole. (Aristotle, 23) It is from the role-playing that the construction of the sign of tragedy depends, for it is through role-playing that the stories acquire life. All the concepts, general ideas and feelings must be embodied in the role-playing, therefore, it is through action that the characters of these signs are represented, and this means that the object/role-playing is pregnant with the

signic character that originated it. The most famous of the preoccupations of Aristotle is in the affect produced by the tragedy, the potentiality of the role-playing, in its perfect execution: to provoke emotion and pleasure.

> The most beautiful tragedy is that whose composition must be, not a simple one, but a complex one, a one whose facts, imitated by it, are able to provoke fear and compassion (for this is the characteristic of this kind of imitation).” (Aristotle, 51)

This terrain of the potential interpreter, as it has already been pointed out, is dictated by deductive thought in organizing the role-playing in such a way as to produce the desired effects, effects always open to many interpretations, for they are punctuated by emotions and the involvement provoked by the pleasure of the public in relation to action and plot. Upon that logic organization Aristotle grounds the concept of the verisimilar: “Both in the representation of the characters as in the organization of the facts, it is a must that one holds fast to necessity and verisimilarity, in such a way that the character, in his words and actions, is in conformity with the necessary and verisimilar, and that the same goes for the succession of what happens.” (Aristotle, 58)

About the verisimilar Aristotle highlights: “(...) one ought to prefer the believable impossible to the incredible possible.” (Aristotle, 93) The verisimilar always deals with the generals (thirdness), which are found in the form of role-playing (secondness) in tragedy.

Action, therefore, suggests the general. This act of suggesting is open to similarities, a central point for the identification with the spectator, for it deals with feelings and emotions which are common to the public. This is quite clear in the following passage: “For that reason, poetry is more philosophical and of a higher character than history, because poetry remains in the universal whereas history only with the particular. The universal is what such categories of men say and do in such circumstances, according to the verisimilar or the necessary.”

(Aristotle, 43)

The question of the verisimilar or not in the movies, in comparison with the tragedy, is not the focus here to be presented, but what is important is to observe the deductive thought organizing the role-playing syntax with the aim of creating potential interpretants, determining, therefore, the manner of telling the tragedy.

Conclusion

the signic genesis of the movies has as its mediating thought pragmatism for it is by understanding this semiotic way that it is possible to understand the process of the construction of the cinematographic sign. Pragmatic thought, as Peirce conceived it, is responsible for giving existence to esthetics and to the concepts and ideas which mould the movie. It is through this process that the syntax of languages, of minds and distinct elements, are woven so as to give life to imagined plots and characters. The conclusion to which Peircean pragmatism leads us is that the duality man x cinematographic technology, or theory and practice, is not perceptible in the act of making the movie, for the construction of the movie sign is based in the unity: esthetic-concept-technique, and that sign depends on that unity to acquire existence. It is under such unity that the multiplicity of the signic fragments composed in various syntactic layers embodies itself in cinematographic language and is harmonized. If we ask a director of photography whether, in the act of making a plan and its illumination, if he distinguishes that duality in the mind, he will probably answer in the negative. Before going to the shooting set, when getting ready to assemble everything, lots of things go through his mind: all his technical knowledge, the esthetic and the concept of the movie, the images that have been suggested to him by the script, his intention in harmonizing it with the whole, the content of the scene, its importance in relation to the organization of the story etc. In that moment, abductive thought will supply him with hypotheses. Deductive thought will allow him to choose which hypothesis is the best one for the best

photography, diagramming them, as he proceeds to the act of choosing the lenses, points of light and their intensity, plan and movement of the camera in the set. Whereas inductive thought, through the experience of assembling all the equipment, supplies the necessary test to perceive if his choices are correct. Thus, the technical knowledge will furnish the tools to give life to what he had thought, and acquire, therefore, existence. That unity is necessary in the construction of photography, and has pragmatic thought as mediator. It is this unity that will weave the regularity in the assemblage of the illumination of the oncoming plans, which will allow the syntax with other elements of the movie, such as the dressing, direction of art, cenography, actors etc. What goes for the director of photography, goes for all the professionals involved, the movie director being responsible for the orchestration of all the fragment/parts, weaving a unity, producing the movie.

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