

The Cognitive Semiotics of Film

In *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film*, Warren Buckland argues that the conflict between cognitive film theory and contemporary film theory is unproductive. Examining and developing the work of “cognitive film semiotics,” a neglected branch of film theory that combines the insights of cognitive science with those of linguistics and semiotics, he investigates Michel Colin’s cognitive semantic theory of film; Francesco Casetti’s and Christian Metz’s theories of film enunciation; Roger Odin’s cognitive-pragmatic film theory; and Michel Colin’s and Dominique Chateau’s cognitive studies of film syntax, formulated within the framework of Noam Chomsky’s transformational generative grammar. In presenting a survey of cognitive film semiotics, this study re-evaluates the film semiotics of the 1960s, highlights the weaknesses of American cognitive film theory, and challenges the move toward “post-theory” in film studies.

Warren Buckland is Lecturer in Screen Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. A former British Academy Post-doctoral Fellow, he is editor of *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind* and has contributed to *Screen*, *Semiotica*, and *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*.

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For Thomas Elsaesser

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Two historians meet at a conference. The one asks the other: “What do you think are the main consequences of the French Revolution?” To which the other responds: “It is too early to tell.” In this book I argue that it is still too early to tell what are the consequences of another revolution – the rise of the Language Analysis tradition, whose origins are to be found in the work of Saussure, Peirce, Wittgenstein, and so on, at the beginning of the twentieth century. As is well known, the Language Analysis tradition has already had a decisive impact on the formation and development of modern (or ‘contemporary’) film theory from the sixties onwards. One reason it is still too early to determine the consequences of the tradition is that the revolution it inaugurated is not complete. The main characteristic of this tradition is that it opposes the philosophy of consciousness, which dominated Western thought from the seventeenth century up to the work of the British idealists at the end of the nineteenth century. The Language Analysis tradition challenged the idealism inherent in the philosophy of the subject and replaced it with a new *mentalité* that reorients thinking toward language and other semiotic systems.

The conflict between the Language Analysis tradition and the philosophy of the subject can be understood today as a conflict between linguistics and cognitive science (or non-linguistic areas of cognitive science). Since the eighties, film theory has restaged this conflict, with the cognitive film theorists, such as David Bordwell, opposing the modern film theorists, such as Christian Metz, whose film theory is based on linguistics and semiotics.

This book begins from the premise that an outright conflict between cognitive film theory and modern film theory is unproductive and then moves on to consider in some detail a branch of modern film theory that combines the insights of cognitive science

with linguistics and semiotics. In Chapter 1, I call these modern film theorists the ‘cognitive film semioticians’ and trace the influence of pragmatic theories of language, together with Noam Chomsky’s linguistics, on their work. The result, as the rest of this book attempts to demonstrate, is a cognitive semiotics of film, which combines the insights of both cognitive film theory and modern film theory.

This book not only presents a survey of the cognitive film semiotics written from the mid-seventies up to the present time, but also offers a brief survey of American cognitive film theory and traces modern film theory’s foundations back to the Language Analysis tradition. In the following pages I therefore argue that modern film theory constitutes one of the disciplines of that tradition and that it has a future since it has shifted its level of analysis – from (in Noam Chomsky’s terms) the level of observational adequacy (the segmentation and classification of a corpus of texts into its ultimate paradigmatic constituents) to the level of descriptive adequacy (the analysis of the rules and institutions that generate texts, rules, and institutions that are defined in cognitive terms).

The analysis is framed by Charles Morris’s well known distinction between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Chapter 2 studies the cognitive semantic theory of film developed by Michel Colin. Chapter 3 investigates recent theorizing into the enunciative dimension of film (a narrow pragmatic theory), as carried out by Francesco Casetti and Christian Metz; Chapter 4 outlines the continuing work of Roger Odin into a broad, cognitive-pragmatic theory of film. Finally, Chapter 5 sets out the results of recent studies, by Michel Colin and Dominique Chateau, into the grammar (or syntax) of film, which they carried out within the framework of Chomsky’s transformational generative grammar.

The relation between this book and the semiotics of Charles Morris ends on this terminological borrowing. Morris’s semiotics is behaviorist, whereas the film theory surveyed in this study attempts to combine semiotics with cognitive science. The ultimate aim of this study is to chart the interface between the Language Analysis tradition and cognitive science as articulated in the work of the cognitive film semioticians.

A significantly different version of Chapter 5 has been published under the title ‘Michel Colin and the Psychological Reality of Film

Semiology," *Semiotica*, 107, 1/2 (1995): 51–79. Sections of the other chapters have been presented at the following conferences and symposia: Hommage à Christian Metz (University of Amsterdam, March 25, 1994); Fifth Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (University of California, Berkeley, June 12–18, 1994); Semiotics of the Media (University of Kassel, Germany, March 20–23, 1995); Post-doctoral Fellowship Symposium (The British Academy, London, December 8, 1995); and the Society of Cinema Studies Conference (Dallas, Texas, March 7–10, 1996).

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have read various chapters and have offered suggestions for revision, as well as those who have provided general guidance and support: Richard Allen, Edward Branigan, Robert Burgoyne, Glen Creeber, Kevin Donnelly, Alison McMahan, Winfried Nöth, Roger Odin, Karen Pehla, Jan Simons, Murray Smith, and Michael Wedel. I owe a special thanks to Thomas Elsaesser for encouraging me over the last twelve years to persevere in the face of adversity. His intellectual strength has enabled me to overcome many of my intellectual weaknesses.

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This book is accompanied by my anthology *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), which collects for the first time in English the work of the cognitive film semioticians discussed in the following chapters.