Typography as Narrative Parameter of Cinematic Art

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Abstract: This article investigates the role of typography in cinema and its impact on the cinematic experience. From the early days of photography and cinema, typography has been used to present words on the screen, enhancing the believability of visual storytelling. As technology evolved, typography continued to serve diverse purposes in films, such as facilitating dialogue, narration, and conveying essential information. Cinema theorists, designers, and semioticians argue that typography in cinema serves specific narrative, aesthetic, and functional objectives. This study draws on semiotic theory, historical context, and insights from design and typography studies to analyze the significance of typography in cinematic storytelling. The article also explores the works of influential theorists, including Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who contributed to understanding the relationship between text and image. Typography has played a crucial role in cinema since the early days of silent films. It has been used not only for informational purposes such as opening titles, subtitles, and end credits but also as a narrative tool to enhance storytelling through visual means. Narrative typography in films adds expressive qualities, conveys tone and emotions, and can manipulate viewer attention. On the other hand, the typography of opening titles serves informational and aesthetic needs by providing detailed information about the film's production. Early experiments with motion typography paved the way for its creative use and expressive potential. Typography continued to evolve while pushed the boundaries of cinematic narrative. However, cinema, like any art form, has gone through phases of complexity and regression, with experimentation leading to new hybrid forms of processing text and images. The exploration of typography in cinema, influenced by linguistic syntax and visual processing, continues to shape cinematic language and storytelling. By focusing on the embedded, narrative or non-narrative text that becomes virtual, this study aims to uncover the additional meanings conveyed through typography and its role in enhancing the cinematic narrative.

Keywords: Typography, Cinematic Narration, Semiotics, Graphic Design

1. Introduction

Initially, photography and subsequently cinema reproduced reality, with typography appearing on the screen from the early examples of cinematic storytelling. While they are much more believable than words, the images and sounds of cinema are encoded systems that stem from reality, sometimes with distortions and other times with imagination [13].

In the era of silent cinema, opening titles, subtitles, and intertitles presented films by displaying words on the screen. However, as technology evolved, recording replaced intertitles. Typography, however, continued to participate through newspapers and books, notes, graffiti on walls. It served the needs of dialogue, narration, understanding the story by the audience. It also provided chronological and spatial information about the world of the film. Sometimes it had a functional character as the translation of a foreign language, and other times, it had an aesthetic character using the language of visual communication (fonts, colors, style) to convey meanings.

Cinema theorists, designers, semioticians, and rhetoricians have argued that cinema typography exists to serve specific narrative, aesthetic, and functional purposes. This article aims to examine the role of typography in cinema and its contribution to the cinematic experience. According to the historian and theorist Michael Betancourt, the grammatical

rules of semiotic theory in cinema are based on "the way the audience perceives the relationship between typography and image, which also determines the meaning that emerges. Whether typography and photography are inadequately connected or remain as separate and distinct "fields" on the screen is the fundamental distinction that defined semiotics." [2].

In the context of the article and seeking studies outside of the cinema realm, such as in design and typography, it is evident that researchers have primarily focused on the historical context and have done very little in terms of creating concepts in design [9].

The semiotic theory that refers to the relationship between text and image was mainly formulated by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault during the 1960s and 1970s. It lays the groundwork for the development of a more comprehensive semiotic analysis and is applied to film titles and motion graphics as a whole.

Barthes' discussion of issues of connotation, co-presence, and all the involved complexes arises from the alternation between understanding images as visual forms and interpreting them as symbolic expressions [2]. Meaning is born from a combination of primary elements (sounds, lines), but the combination of these elements in the first degree is not enough to exhaust the creation of meaning: what has been combined forms sets that can be combined with each other at a second and third level [1].

For his part, Foucault characterizes the relationship between text and image in Western painting as unequal, as one always dominates the other. Foucault acknowledges that this relationship is rarely equal, but what is vital is that verbal elements and visual representations are never given simultaneously. This is a dynamic that Deleuze, writing to Foucault, aptly describes as an "audiovisual battle" [15].

Before identifying the potential research contributions of this article, the framework of cinematic typography, as described by Michel Chion in Words on Screen [4], will be defined by distinguishing narrative from cinematic narrativity. The former concerns what happens to characters, what they know and can perceive, while the latter concerns what happens on the screen, such as framing, editing, and so forth, which is not simply a representation or expressive direction of narrative reality. After this distinction, Chion identifies the five basic ways in which text appears in cinematic film.

The first way is the non-narrative text of the opening and closing titles on a neutral background, independent of the main film. The second way defines the also non-narrative text of the opening and closing titles, which, however, is in front of a narrative image and/or action, as well as some narrative detail or information. The third category includes the text, as part of the scenic narrative space without being the central element or subject of the scene. The role of this category is quite important. When the viewer watches the action, he/she may delay noticing these narrative written elements such as shop windows, signs, posters, advertisements, etc., but they set the era and area, creating a

sense of everyday life. Often, these elements act as quiet messages. In the fourth category, it describes the embedded text as a close-up detail between two scenes. Since the early days of cinema, it has participated in cinematic history with the dual form of letters, book pages, etc. In the fifth and final category, which this article will focus on, the embedded, narrative or non-narrative, text that becomes virtual. This text includes written words that convey more meaning than the story itself, that take on a natural narrative form, and particularly when they fade, lead us to the reality they have invoked. Someone reads a poster, a business card, the name of a place and they serve as an introduction to these places, this circumstance, this character that appears in the next shot. This article will focus on this category through the theories developed in the fields of cinema and design for the interpretation of the meanings contained in the narrative.

2. Typography in Cinema

Typography has been used as a narrative tool in cinema since the early era of silent films, serving the need to tell a story using only visual means. Along with the titles at the beginning of the film, subtitles, and end credits, the written narrative text of a film was - and continues to be - a vital element for understanding and developing a story.

Narrative typography can be understood as a communicative medium that adds some of the expressive qualities of film to that of static text. It can be effective in conveying the tone of the speaker's voice, the character's attributes, and the emotional properties of the text. It can also interact with the viewer in different ways than static text and, in some cases, direct or manipulate the viewer's attention [6].

In contrast to narrative typography, which is part of the film, the typography of the opening titles serves informational needs for intellectual property, contributors (artists, technicians, etc.). The external part of the film is incorporated into it, providing detailed information about the design, production, and implementation of the movie. Their different functions determine the contrasting visual approach with which they are treated. On the one hand, the narrative typography obeys the needs of the script and the limitations of the image content, while on the other hand, the typography of the titles conveys the information and aesthetics of the film as a typographic introduction.

However, the birth of motion typography came from the exploration of the possibilities of the opening titles of a film that surpassed their simple informational character and experimented with expressiveness, aesthetics, and movement. In 1900, the British eccentric director Cecil M. Hepworth presented the comedic short film How It Feels to Be Run Over (1900) with the, according to many, first official appearance of titles. The film literally shows what it feels like to have a horse-drawn carriage pass over the camera with a clever trick by Hepworth, ending with handwritten text that says "!!! Oh! Mother will be pleased," capturing the rather peculiar humor of the director. (Figure 1)
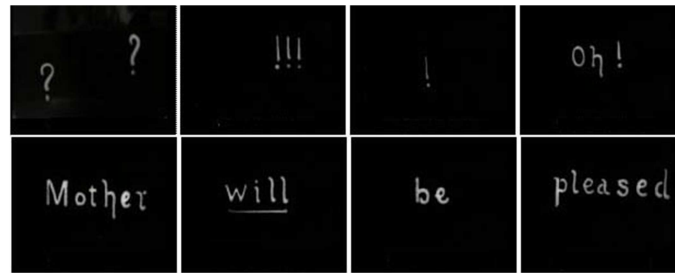
Figure 1. How It Feels to Be Run Over (1900).

A few years before the First World War and shortly before the Second International Peace Conference in The Hague in 1907, people were talking about peace, women's rights, prohibition, labor relations, child welfare, and moving pictures.

What appeared at first as a "craze for moving pictures" was bigger than anyone expected. However, reactions were mixed. Many feared that it was out of control. America was facing for the first time the phenomenon known as mass communication. Newspapers and magazines were also part of this, but they did not participate in the enthusiasm and anxiety that surrounded the moving picture. Throughout the country, small theaters appeared, known as nickelodeons, which became a gold mine during the economic depression of 1907.

Until then, the demand for spectacle, the popularity of film stories, and the new audience of immigrants from various cultures who filled the nickelodeons in the big cities, led to a crisis in narrative cinema. The older storytelling methods were inadequate in relation to the increasing complexity of the stories that producers were trying to create, while complaints were made about a lack of clarity. One way in which this crisis erupted was the urgent demand for someone to speak along with the film to explain what was happening, the "showman-narrator" or lecturer. For this reason, there were new experiments with mechanical sound synchronization with the film. The Cameraphone opened in Baltimore on April 27, 1908. In May, the Theatrephone was announced, a device for synchronizing discs with moving images to present Hamlet and other plays as well as operas. The French company Gaumont sent its new talking and singing film machine to Savannah, Georgia, in the summer of 1908, along with two technicians to install it, the Chronophone, and by October it was playing in New York. One month later, there were three mechanical sound systems on the market: Gaonont's Chronophone, the Cameraphone, and the Synchroscope. Actors, like the one named Actofogue, traveled with films on the road, describing the dialogues behind the screen. Another such group appeared under the name Humanovo, organized by Adolph Zukor, later founder of Paramount Pictures [3].

In 1907, Porter directed "College Chums," (Figure 2) giving an active role to typography to meet new needs and enhance cinematic storytelling. One day in the park, a young woman sees her fiancé in a tender scene with another woman. When she calls him for an explanation, he tells her that it's his sister, but she remains unconvinced. During the telephone conversation, the characters are positioned on opposite ends of the screen, above the rooftops of the city, with the words following an imaginary wave from the speaker to the receiver. As the discussion reaches its climax, the words take on emotional charge and the phrases collide, giving the conversation a specific visible form.

With this spontaneous experimentation, Porter gave the text the ability to be visualized, fundamentally changing the experience of silent cinema. At the same time, he used the split-screen effect, a technique quite common in early cinema mainly in scenes with telephone conversations. However, unlike the general trend that incorporated two or three different images into one frame in order to advance the plot more quickly, Porter approached the scene more artistically. As the protagonists are located at the top edges of the screen and converse, a two-dimensional city is displayed at the bottom of the screen like a theatrical backdrop. In this way, Porter created an excellent visual example of cinematic storytelling before the transition to sound.

Figure 2. College Chums (1907).

Another example of moving typography in the early years

of cinema is the short film "Des Pfarrer Töchterleins" (1912) by Adolf Gärtner (Figure 3). It is a romantic drama where during a telephone conversation, letters appear on the telecommunications network infrastructure.

Figure 3. Co Des Pfarrer Töchterleins (1912).

In the following years, titles significantly increased their presence with continuous innovations, either in more complex designs or in the use of text. Explanatory texts that narrated the plot and dialogue texts that depicted the conversation of the actors became established in the movies that followed. However, as production companies in the United States and Europe were developing, there was a need to export films to other markets. Without being an obstacle, the presence of titles managed to adapt to new needs. Texts could be removed, translated, filmed, and reintroduced, and often used "live dubbing" with Bonimenteur in France and Benshi in Japan, who described the story behind the screen.

One of the innovations in the depiction of dialogues on the screen, which does not belong to the category of subtitles or intermediate titles of scenes, was invented by the eccentric visionary Abraham S. Schomer. His bold attempt to overcome the obvious limitations of intermediate titles was applied in the movie The Chamber Mystery (1920) (Figure 4), combining intermediate dialogues with text in a shape (such as a speech bubble) that was added in post-production. Although Schomer's pioneering technique did not receive equivalent acceptance from the audience, it remains an important milestone in the development of title techniques.

Undoubtedly, cinema covers a wide range, from technical innovation, visual, dramatic narratives to music. It is one of the dramatic arts and has both visual and narrative elements more strongly than any other art, a characteristic recognized first by Griffith. The art of cinema was created after a process of reproduction. The neutral standard was developed based on the complex systems of the novel, painting, drama, and music, revealing new truths about some elements of these arts [13].

For some narrative types, the vehicle is the image, as is the case with cinematic storytelling. According to Metz, each image is not equivalent only to a form or a word, but rather to a complete statement [12].

Robert Weine, in "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" (1919), managed to enhance the cinematic narrative by combining visual motifs with expressionist themes, relying on the eccentric artistic style of the image. The highly experimental and stylized sets and costumes have a particular symbolism and influenced classic German silent films that followed, such as F. W. Murnau's "Nosferatu" (1922) and Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" (1927).

Although cinema's ability to reproduce images of the natural world, that is, to faithfully record simple events, could exclude it as a medium for expressionism, Robert Weine approached it as a challenge. He managed to film the action of the story against a background of familiar expressionist scenes, distorting the natural world in a unique way, with forms that externalize the tormented inner world of the disturbed narrator. Using stylistic techniques and formal elements of German expressionism, such as artificial lighting that emphasized harsh shadows, strong contrasts and angular shots that accentuated the fantastic and the strange, as well as extreme interpretations, he managed to convey concepts such as insanity, fear, and schizophrenia through film direction. The expressiveness of the image externalized the inner world of human emotions and desires, conveying them on the screen by deliberately using exaggerated scenes that emphasized fear. In addition, Weine creatively used moving typography to climax the story. At that moment when Dr. Caligari is in a state of madness, the phrase "Du musst Caligari werden" (You must become Caligari) appears in a cinematic way, like an inner voice dictating to him what to do.
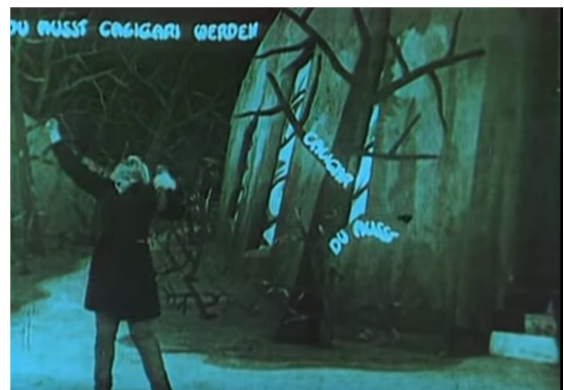

Figure 4. The Chamber Mystery (1920).

Figure 5. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919).

But just like an organism, cinema has a life cycle that goes through phases. The increasing complexity of silent films, followed by artistic regression with the advent of sound films, placed cinema on a trajectory comparable to that of the visual arts. Guido Adler stated in the magazine Der Stil in der Music (1911) that, for the pattern of appearance, development, and decline of a style, the intermediate period usually serves as the main basis for comparison. This period allowed critics to establish what is called the "classic" as the pinnacle of evolution. For this reason, the masterpieces of the 1920s were characterized as the mature classic works of the average cinema [5].

Later, these works served as inspiration for experimentation that led to new forms of processing with hybrid visual nature based on the composition of texts and images, which were "governed by linguistic syntax rather than visual processing rhythms, which is the most significant challenge for both cinematic language and processing as a pure visual language" [7].

3. Conclusion

This work aims to present a comprehensive view of how researchers and theorists of cinema and semiotics have approached the use of typography in cinematic narration. It primarily focuses on the aspect concerning the composition of a coherent audiovisual narrative through the use of typography as part of that narrative. The research is based on the semiotic analysis of films, aiming to explore both the denotative and connotative meanings achieved through the visual composition of images and typography. To understand some of the factors that contribute to the composition of an original and inventive narrative in the realm of cinema, specific scenes have been analyzed through the principles of graphic design and cinema.

Typography appears on the screen from the early examples of cinematic storytelling. Written language is initially transformed into visual and then into audiovisual text. Graphic design, through typographic composition, also incorporates its own elements into the structural elements of cinematic language, based on the theory of Gestalt, which was developed in 1910. This theory has had the most decisive influence on the basic principles of design, both in theoretical training and in applied practice. The essence of the theory is captured in the laconic words of the German Kurt Koffka, according to whom: "the whole is different from the sum of its individual parts." [10] Practically, this means that we perceive the whole differently from the elements that make it up, but it is often misunderstood that the whole is something more than these individual elements.

According to Orit Halpern [14], "the cinema is the classic paradigm of Gestalt theory phenomena." A film unfolds simultaneously in space and time, and typography adds another element to the forms that have already been shaped through cinematic storytelling. By likening cinema to Gestalt theory, the overall image becomes perceptible to the viewer through the elements that make it up. In this way, the viewer

can perceive the dialogue between two people and the way it unfolds in the plot of the story solely through the moving typography, which is perceived as an auditory illusion, as seen in the films College Chums, Des Pfarrer Töchterleins, and The Chamber Mystery.

Meaning is born from a multiple combination of elements, as supported by Barthes [2]. Robert Weine, in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, managed to enhance the cinematic narrative by combining visual motifs with expressionist themes, relying on the eccentric artistic style of the image. On the other hand, Foucault sees the dynamic relation between text and image, described as an "audiovisual battle" by Deleuze [15]. Weine uses stylistic techniques and formal elements of German expressionism to convey concepts such as insanity, fear, and schizophrenia through film direction, while moving typography escalates the climax.

However, the very existence of cinema is based on form, which is created by the sequence of static images. Perception of motion is the result of a mental process that combines these images into a moving whole. According to Halpern, "the static and indicative image of photography, which is encompassed in cinema, is secondary in significance compared to the form or structure created between the static image and the viewer," [14] meaning that cinematic techniques, such as a close-up, help the viewer to choose only what is necessary or important. As the film unfolds, the viewer's mind constructs even more forms, not only through perception but also cognitively, narratively, and stylistically. In the classic masterpiece The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, stylistic techniques and elements of German Expressionism function as a simulation of the real world with the aim of forming concepts in the viewer's mind.

As Metz aptly put it, "The cinema is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand."[12] And Monaco adds, "Its semiotics is easy to explain because it is difficult to understand. Somewhere in between lies the genius of the film." [13]

In the examples studied regarding the use of typography, both the composition and the visual systems of cinematic narration are enhanced by the rules dictated by graphic design. Therefore, as the main purpose of graphic design is to communicate a message, the use of typographic composition as part of cinematic narration reinforces the understanding of the conveyed messages and enriches the connotations of the films.

Marshall McLuhan [11] describes the emergence of cinema as a world of triumphant illusions and dreams that could be constructed by an educated and mechanized culture. Along with the emergence of cinema, Cubism appears, which Gombrich considers "the most radical attempt to eliminate ambiguity and impose a reading of the image - that of an artificial construction, a colorful canvas." [8] According to these opinions we can draw significant conclusions.

Both perspectives reflect an era of upheaval and the advancement of technological and cultural developments. Cinema offers the possibility of creating virtual worlds and illusions through mechanical reproduction, while Cubism seeks to transcend traditional boundaries and the ambiguity of the image through artificial construction and a deconstructive

approach.

Narrative typography in cinema provides structure and logic to the cinematic world, serving as an additional medium of communication and expression. Through typography, the cinematic message is conveyed in a specific way, influencing how we perceive and interpret the image.

Therefore, we can conclude that typography is a medium that imparts meaning and message to cinema. While the image remains the primary medium of communication, typography contributes to the understanding and acceptance of the message. Thus, we can reiterate McLuhan's notion that the medium is the message, acknowledging that typography is a medium that shapes how we perceive and interpret the cinematic message.

Acknowledgements

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