IS CINEMA A LANGUAGE?

Frank Capra, a noted Hollywood director once said, ‘Film is one of the three universal languages, the other two are mathematics and music.’ We can easily sense that Capra cannot be entirely wrong because, from our own experience as film viewers we all know that cinema tells us delightful stories and communicates with us as effortlessly and as easily as any human language. Since its emergence as a popular form of entertainment towards the end of 19th century and through its formative years in the early 20th century, silent cinema had successfully established itself as a unique ‘story-telling’ medium, using moving images and title cards to narrate stories. People all over the globe enjoy the movies without having any formal knowledge of visual story telling as such. A study of the history of reception of cinema during the silent era confirms that there had been something ‘universal’ about the cinematic mode of storytelling. There had been no need to learn how to see films in order to enjoy them. The untrained, uninitiated and mostly illiterate audience of early silent cinema enjoyed the movies spontaneously and freely without being fully aware of the specificities of cinematic modes of storytelling. Even to enjoy a dime novel one needed to acquire the skills of reading – literacy is still a precondition of reading. But enjoying a film remains astonishingly free from any such preconditions. Learning the grammar of cinema has never been a pre-condition of understanding and
enjoying a movie. This universality and immediacy in visual communication that make cinema so unique (the audio component was added later) was recognized by great masters of world cinema like D. W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin and many others who believed that cinema is a language and the language of cinema is universal. Yet, we must remind here what noted film theorist Christian Metz, author of the much acclaimed book titled Film Language, once said, ‘Film is hard to explain, because it is so easy to understand.’ Indeed Metz has made ‘the crucial distinction between knowing what a thing means and knowing how it comes to have that meaning, between ‘tacit’ knowing and the sort of knowledge that can be readily articulated to others.’ To understand the specificities of cinematic language we must re-examine and reassess the intrinsic relationship between language and communication.

**LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION AND CINEMA**

Human language has been defined as ‘a system of communication used by a particular society or community.’ We all agree that human language is a very special system of communication because of its complexity which is governed by a rigid grammar. We talk to others to communicate and we write on paper to ‘record’ our thoughts and feelings for future recalling and preservation of knowledge. Most prominent languages consist of two components: the oral and the textual. There are human languages that were and still are purely oral without having their textual component. In fact, all languages have originated first as an ‘oral’ mode of communication and later, through hundreds of years of practice, some of these oral languages were evolved considerably to have their written component as well. There are about 3000 oral or spoken languages in the world out of which only 400 have some kind of written form. The 17th Century prescriptive grammarians studied language with intension of controlling it –
setting down rules for people, telling them how it ought to be used. Grammar is the bible, the ‘sacred text’, that cannot and should not be challenged by a speaker or practitioner.

Cinema definitely evokes a sense of communication. Films tell stories through images and sounds and as Metz has noted, it is a ‘system of images (and sounds) aiming at describing, developing, narrating an event or a sequence of events’. But a major difference between human language and cinema is that the later violates one of the fundamental components of language – communication. When two or more people talk or take part in a discussion they communicate with each other, they share information, thoughts. They share, question, comment, criticize. Human language is the unique tool of inter-communication while cinema is a medium of restricted communication. Cinematic communication is ‘one-way’ communication where the viewer remains a recipient throughout. The viewer has neither the ability nor the tools to establish a direct communication between the ‘speaker’ (the director of the film) and the listener (viewer). The spectator cannot effectively influence the ‘spoken narration’ which, in case of cinema, is the film itself. Viewing a movie is to some extent more like reading a novel or a story. The reader can get influenced by the act of reading, but cannot alter or influence the written text. We, as spectators, can and will respond to what we see on screen, but cannot get a reaction through inter-communication. We can safely conclude that film uses, among other things, written and spoken language, but as such it does not exactly function like verbal language whose primary aim is to have open communication or dialogue among the participants. If cinema is a language then a film is a fixed ‘utterance’ or a speech. To understand film as ‘utterance’ we need to approach and analyse cinema as a language.

LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO CINEMA
The Russian Formalists were the first to study the relationship between human language and cinema. They were the first to talk about the linguistic basis of cinema and considered film as ‘internal speech’ and compared it with ‘poetry’. In film they discovered cinematic equivalent of poetic devices such as epithet, simile and metaphor and talked about the existence of a cinematic syntax. In his essay ‘Film Form – New Problems’ Sergei Eisenstein, the famous Soviet filmmaker, discussed at length how cinema can render the syntax of inner speech. Much later, in the 1960s and 1970s, the French film theorists belonging to the schools of Structuralism and Semiotics employed linguistic theory to analyse film. Colin MacCabe introduced the term ‘metalanguage’ to help us to understand filmic discourses much like novelistic discourses.

To make sense of the critical position that linguistics has brought to cinema studies we must take a closer look at the ways a language function. Human language, any established language for that matter, consists of (1) a vocabulary, (2) a grammar and a (3) syntax. A vocabulary is made of words and grammar and syntax are the tools or rules by which words are arranged to make a sentence or an utterance. The smallest units in any language are the letters of the alphabet – the collection of letters. Letters are usually abstract signs or ideograms originated from pictures or images. Each letter has two components – the abstract sign and the associated sound or the phoneme. Thus, when we read the abstract sign ‘A’, we usually read it as a phoneme having its designated sound ‘a’. Letters of the alphabets are combined in various ways to create meaningful words and words are combined to make meaningful sentences. It appears that this process can be compared to movie making process itself – shots are combined together to create meaningful sequences and sequences can be combined together to create meaningful scenes. If cinema is a language, then what are the similarities and dissimilarities between textual and spoken languages and cinema? Well, if the
smallest unit in a language are the abstract letters, then what is or are the smallest units in a film? The answer is – the frame which is a visual representation. The problem is that in any given language the alphabets have a rather limited number of letters. If compared, and it is not difficult to understand, that number of frames or single images in a shot cannot be predetermined or restricted at all. The camera can shoot anything at any place and at any time and the length of the shot can never be predetermined or fixed. Robert Richardson has rightly drawn our attention to the following: ‘In addition to the parallels between language and film in matters of vocabulary and simple grammar, but closely connected to the subject, is the use of imagery. It can be argued that all words, even the most abstract, began as images. ... Between the film’s use of imagery and its literary uses there are both significant similarities and differences. Imagery is used both for vividness and for significance; and one might say that literature often has the problem of making the significant somehow visible, while film often find itself trying to make the visible significant.’ The word ‘tree’ has a specific meaning and this ‘one’ meaning can be easily communicated to anyone reading the written text ‘tree’. The meaning of the word ‘tree’ is an abstract one since it does not refer to any particular tree but the concept called ‘tree’. However, in case of cinema, the representation of the abstract concept ‘tree’ is more complicated. In literary utterance the word ‘tree’ remains as an abstract concept – it does not refer to any specific tree as such unless a particular reference has been made in advance. However, in cinema, a visual representation of a ‘tree’ will always be the image of that ‘specific’ tree shot by the camera at a given moment. If two different persons are asked to photograph a tree the end result will always be images of two different trees. The film frame is always a photographic representation and can never
communicate an abstract concept but a specific or a particular one. Moreover, a frame carries in itself more information than a single word. First and foremost, a frame is always an image which represents light, colour, texture and object(s). Moreover, the compositional characteristics of the frame can use foreground, background and mid-ground to emphasise on one or more elements present in the image. In addition, camera angles often play a greater role in manipulating the space, objects and characters within the space of the frame. Carefully planned use of different lenses can further enhance the depth and affect the look of the image, and, this can be significantly influence the viewer’s emotion and understanding of the content. If frames are the alphabets of the cinematic language then the concept of vocabulary in cinema should be an endless series of photographic frames or shots. The grammar and syntax of film language is based on the craft of editing – both image and sound. Editing is nothing but the set of conventions that tells us how to arrange the shots to make a meaningful statement or a narration. It is true that a single frame or a series of frames known as a shot have meaning much as words. However, a pre-planned arrangement of a number of shots conveys meaning in a more complex manner than a sentence or a phrase. Having noted that Metz concludes, ‘The cinema is a composite language at the very level of its matter of expression. Not only has it several codes, but several languages in some way, are already contained in it. These languages are distinguished among themselves by their very physical definition: moving pictures arranged in sequence, phonetic sound, musical sound, noise.’

LANGUAGE OR LANGUAGE SYSTEM?

Linguistics is generally centred on speech while semiotics, based on Ferdinand Saussure’s model of linguistics, studies all kinds of significations except speech – writing, architecture, food, fashion, television and cinema to name a few. They are
all different systems of signification. We must recognize that unlike human language cinema has an immense and virtually unlimited vocabulary without having a dictionary of film words and governing syntax as such. The greatest challenge the cinematic medium has faced since its beginning is that it has failed to evolve a perfect film grammar. What is generally known as ‘film grammar’ is actually a set of cinematic conventions or ‘thumb rules’ but definitely not a grammar. Grammar is the rigid but invisible structuring of language and is almost insurmountable. In case of cinema, the conventions are there to break in order to make our film viewing experience unique. Nevertheless, the conventions of cinema have been nearly perfected since the invention of cinema to form a functional system of narration. The complexity of cinematic narrative which employs its own system of ‘telling’ or ‘narration’ has been termed as a ‘signifying system’ by Metz. For him cinema is a ‘means of expression rather than a means of communication.’ The signifying system is indeed a complex system of codes pertaining to various means of expressions including verbal language as used in cinema. Film uses images and sounds which become signs within the film itself. As such images used in films are not signs themselves, but through the process of narration—which is a process of signification—makes the images function as signs. According to Jean Mitry, the process of signification happens in three stages:

1. Perception (identifying or recognizing the image as it appears)
2. Comprehension (meaning of the image in the context of the given narrative)
3. New or added meaning as acquired by the image through its relationship to other images or sequences in the film.

For example, in Battleship Potemkin, we find this image: the pince-nez (the spec) of Dr. Smirnov, hanging from a rope. At the first level we recognize the spec as a
spec and not anything else. In the next level, we recognize the spec as the particular spec belonging to Dr. Smirnov – the person who used this spec to examine and declare the rotten meat at edible – the rotten meat that caused sailors’ agitation. At the third and final level, we acquire the symbolic meaning of the image of the spec hanging from the rope. Dr. Smirnov has been thrown overboard after the sailors’ revolt. The spec represents the pince-nez wearing class – the class that controlled ‘knowledge’ and oppressed the working class. Now the sailors’ revolt has eliminated the oppressing class which now makes the hanging spec an object of ridicule, a symbol of powerless oppressor.

Metz proposes that to understand cinema we need to have a semiological approach to cinema – the study of cinema as a system of signs and codes. He divides the cinematic codes into two sections: (1) The Image codes and (2) the Sound codes. Images codes are those rooted in the image itself – so these are also iconic codes. Sound codes are the sounds we find in the movies and also the sounds that stand in montage with picture or functions as a counterpoint. Metz analysed the ‘image codes’ and ‘sound codes’ further to emphasise on how a system of codes form the language of cinema. However, Metz’s incomplete list of image codes and sound codes makes it difficult to fully comprehend his theory of cine-semiology. Metz theoretical propositions have been most influential and debated one – he remained a source of inspiration and criticism. One of the most acclaimed post-Metzian theories of film language comes from David Bordwell who has proposed an alternative theory of narration.

**PRINCIPLES OF NARRATIONS**

In his seminal book titled Narration in Fiction Film Bordwell proposes the following:

‘We have seen theories of narration founded upon superficial analogies between film and other media – literature or theatre (the mimetic approach); literature,
speech, or writing (the diegetic approach). The theory I propose see narration as a formal activity, a notion comparable to Eisenstein’s rhetoric of form. In keeping with a perceptual-cognitive approach to the spectator’s work, the theory treats narration as a process which is not in its basic aims specific to any medium. As a dynamic process, narration deploys the material and procedures of each medium for its ends. Thinking of narration in this way yields considerable scope for investigation while still allowing us to build in the specific possibilities of the film medium. In addition, a form-centred approach sets itself the task of explaining how narration functions in the totality of the film. Narrational patterning is a major part of the process by which we grasp films more or less as coherent wholes.’

The formalist approach of Bordwell sees films as patterned systems that allow the viewers to construct the story based on their experience of conventions of storytelling. Bordwell suggests that cinematic narration is better understood as the organisation of a set of cues for the construction of the story. He focuses on the formal features of film medium in order to comprehend the narrative process of cinematic storytelling. Bordwell concentrates on four major filmmaking traditions: Classical narration of Hollywood, Art cinema narration styles (European school), Historical-materialist narration (the Soviet School) and parametric narration (style-centred or dialectical films).

The complexity of cinematic narration however can best be understood by analysing its different stylistic approaches to visualization and mise-en-scene. Consider, for example, a reading of last scene of Akira Kurosawa’s Ikiru as described by Michael Roemer:

‘At the end of Ikiru the dying bureaucrat has succeeded in building the playground. It is winter night; the camera moves slowly past a jungle-gym; beyond it we see the old man, swaying to and fro on a child’s swing and singing
to himself under the falling snow. The various components of this scene are hard to separate: the hoarse, cracked voice of the dying man; his happiness; the song itself. But the motion of the camera, the falling snow, and the low movement of the swing certainly contribute to the extraordinary sense of peace and reconciliation that is communicated by the image.’

The elements present in the last sequence of the famous film are many and the cinematic treatment of the visual and sound elements does create a profound audio-visual experience in the mind of the viewer. The winter night, slow movement of the camera which indicates a continuous change in overall frame composition, the movement of the swing or the movement within the frame, the old man, the snowing, the song, the cracked voice of the old man, and the words of the song: the arrangement of these sound and image elements is carefully designed and controlled by the director / author. The mise-en-scene has been carefully coordinated by the director to create a ‘reality effect’ that is exclusively cinematic. This is language of cinema at its best and most expressive level.

**CONCLUSION**

All the different approaches to our understanding cinema as a language or language-system have one thing in common: as one of the newest medium of communication cinema has certain unique features and characteristics that need to be examined and explored again and again. The need to look at the formalist properties of film is still valid and this should form the basis of any future investigation of the language of cinema. With Bordwell we have returned to the study of the film form – we reinvestigate how a film is constructed to create meaning and generate pleasure. Most crucially, we must not forget that cinema as a complex narrative art is still evolving and it would be perhaps premature to conclude that it would or would not develop as language proper. Film is primarily
an ever evolving narrational process and it will remain so in future. Perhaps French film director Alain Resnais was right when he said, ‘the cinema is far from having found its syntax.’ However, he himself has proved that it is still possible to tell compelling cinematic stories without one.