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Warren Buckland

Black Cats, Dark Rooms, and Paper Tigers

A Reply to Petric and Grodal

Mirko Petric

'Both Semiotics and Cognitivism?'

Film-Philosophy, vol. 5 no. 11, April 2001

<http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol5-2001/n11petric>

Torben Grodal

'Old Wine in Old Bottles'

Film-Philosophy, vol. 5 no. 12, April 2001

<http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol5-2001/n12grodal>

What is philosophy?

Philosophy is a dark room.

What is Marxist philosophy?

Marxist philosophy is a black cat in a dark room.

What is Marxist-Leninist philosophy?

Marxist-Leninist philosophy is a man looking in a dark room for a black cat
-- which isn't there!

(Traditional Soviet joke)

It is a pleasant surprise to read a review of one's book, since you know that the reviewer is obliged to spend more time and effort on reading it than the average reader. It is therefore a privilege to have the same journal publish two reviews of the same book, since the reviewer's obligation is doubled (a problem shared is a problem doubled, in this instance). Both Mirko Petric and Torben Grodal have spent a good deal of time and effort reviewing my book *_The Cognitive Semiotics of Film_*, and I want to write a short response to acknowledge their efforts and set the record straight on a number of points.

The Cognitive Semiotics of Film emerged from my reading of the work of a group of authors whose first unifying feature is that they are all directly responding to and developing Christian Metz's film semiotics. These authors (Michel Colin, Dominique Chateau, Roger Odin, and Francesco Casetti) employ concepts from cognitive science, linguistics (Noam Chomsky's transformational generative grammar), and pragmatics to develop what I call a 'cognitive semiotics of film'. My first attempt to study their work

resulted in an anthology, which I edited in 1995, called *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*. *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* represents my second attempt to study their work. In the future I intend to leave behind these authors and develop my own cognitive semiotics of film. While Petric clearly understands the origins and aims of my book, Grodal is led astray by his own agenda, for he criticises me for not including a discussion of himself, as well as the work of others, such as Ed Tan and Murray Smith. These authors have written significant and important books on film theory (I have reviewed two of them elsewhere -- see References). The fact that I do not see their work as emerging from Metz's film semiotics is the reason I did not discuss them in my book.

Both Petric and Grodal focus more on Chapters 2 and 5, so I shall only comment on their review of these chapters. As will become clear, I cannot take Grodal's review as a very sincere or serious effort. His review reminds me of the proverbial man in a dark room looking for a black cat which isn't there. He therefore has to invent the black cat -- or, to change metaphors, he has to invent 'straw man' arguments, and then criticise me for holding those arguments. In scrutinising his criticisms of my book, I shall show that his black cats are no fiercer than paper tigers.

In reviewing Chapter 2, 'The Body on Screen and In Frame: Film and Cognitive Semantics', Grodal criticises my understanding and application of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (L+J) cognitive semantic theory to film. Briefly, L+J's model has two main parts: (1) they argue that schemata,

which constitute our conceptual structure, are formed from the experiences of bodily motion and from the body's interaction with the environment. (2) Armed with these kinesthetic image schemata, L+J argue that we come to understand new experiences in other, broader domains: that is, we structure the new domains with the image schemata derived from our bodily experience. This implies that, firstly, we do not perceive new domains in an 'objective', passive manner, but always perceive them in relation to ourselves -- that is, our bodies (hence our vision is embodied); and secondly, these image schemata have a 'generative' capacity, in that they are learnt from a limited experience, but can then be extended and used to structure other, new experiences.

At the end of Chapter 2 I investigated the way spectators comprehend the film frame in terms of L+J's bodily-based container schema (44-51). My argument here, following L+J, is that we understand our experiences in terms of our bodily image-schemata. This implies that our mind is embodied, that we understand our environment from a body-centric perspective. Grodal distorts my understanding and application to film of L+J:

'Buckland uses Lakoff and Johnson's idea of embodiment as if they think that embodied schemata means schemata about the body. But the correct description is that 'embodied' means that the interaction between the embodied mind and the world is the basic foundation of meaning. Lakoff and Johnson's idea of embodiment is not a theory of the body, but a theory of the embodied mind in interaction with the world'.

However, in my several page summary of L+J's work (39-44), I make it quite clear that their theory is, in Grodal's terms, 'a theory of the embodied mind in interaction with the world'. And I make this even clearer when I analyse the film frame and diegesis in terms of L+J's image schemata. We first need to ask: What exactly does 'the embodied mind in interaction with the world' involve? The answer I gave in Chapter 2 is that it means the application of schemata to new domains and experiences (in this instance, film). When I argued that the film frame and diegesis can be understood and categorised in terms of one of our embodied image schemata -- the container schema -- then I am using L+J's theory correctly (in Lakoff's terms, my theory simply illustrates the principle of category extension). I am not, therefore arguing that L+J develop a theory of the body per se (the first part of their theory). I am also following the second part of their theory, that an embodied mind interacts with its environment, and that such an interaction involves applying and extending kinesthetic image schemata. Grodal therefore misunderstands and misrepresents my application to film of L+J's cognitive semantics.

In the same paragraph Grodal also argues that my theory of the frame and diegesis is similar to a psychoanalytic theory. Here, I would argue that my cognitive semantic theory is *replacing* the psychoanalytic theory of the same phenomenon.

Petric expresses scepticism that the work of the cognitive film

semioticians combines the insights of cognitive theory with semiotics. In his brief commentary on Chapter 2 (in which I outline Michel Colin's work, amongst other things), Petric acknowledges that Colin's explicit aim is to attempt to combine the two disciplines, but he doesn't explain why he is sceptical of Colin's attempt.

Chapter 5, 'All in the Mind? The Cognitive Status of Film Grammar', is probably the most ambitious chapter. I review the way Colin and Dominique Chateau develop a grammar of film based on Noam Chomsky's transformational generative grammar (which Colin attempts to do by re-reading Metz's *grande syntagmatique* in terms of Chomsky's work), although I also reference Chomsky's concepts of levels of adequacy and cognitive reality, plus his study of 'degrees of grammaticalness' and semi-sentences, as well as Ray Jackendoff and Fred Lerdahl's study of preference rules. Grodal's review of this chapter is too partial to be taken seriously, for he does not take the above theories into account. If he had done so, there would be no need for him to rehearse the outdated 'textual' critiques of Metz's *grande syntagmatique*, for he would have understood that Colin takes the *grande syntagmatique* to a different level of reality (cognitive reality), rendering such 'textual' criticisms redundant. Before criticising a theoretical position, a reviewer has to represent it adequately.

Petric takes into consideration all the theories I outline in Chapter 5, but remains sceptical that they result in a cognitive semiotics of film.

There's no need to summarise the reasons why I think they do constitute a

cognitive semiotic film theory, because Petric outlines my main points in a clear and perceptive way. After expressing his scepticism throughout his review, I would like to have read his reasons for such scepticism, and how such scepticism can be overcome, not least because such comments will be valuable when I attempt to develop my own cognitive semiotic film theory.

I am convinced that any future development of a cognitive semiotic film theory should refer to Chomsky, for I agree with Thomas Sebeok's statement that '[t]he compatibility of Chomsky's theory with semiotic views of symbolic function remains to be explored, but will probably find its explanation when both can be integrated into the fabric of a more comprehensive cognitive science'. [1]

Liverpool John Moores University, England

Footnote

1. Sebeok, *An Introduction to Semiotics*, p. 112.

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PO Box 26161, London SW8 4WD, England

Contact: editor@film-philosophy.com

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