Problems in Fiction Film Analysis: Development and Testing of an Analytical and Interpretive Model with Digital Tools

Livia Giunti / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract[1]
Università di Pisa

At the centre of fiction film analysis one encounters multiple complexities, which stem from the nature of the audio-visual language and from its specific faculty to combine multiple elements. This 'pluricodicity' has no equivalent in other representative arts and narratives, which also renders film narration itself particularly ambiguous and problematic. Mainly, the study of the configuration of time — which is inextricably linked to the study of the filmic enunciation instances — constitutes in my judgement one of the principle ways of understanding film text.

Once the centrality of the temporal issue is declared, it is necessary to determine several configurations of time in relation to the activity of the enunciation instance. These explicit elements, or indicative traces, are caught up in the temporal organisation of events, in the deixis, in the use of tenses by narrators and narrative voices, in the choice and the articulation of shooting and editing techniques and, finally, in the management/combination of the various matters of expression. My research focused on two films which are exemplary from this point of view: *Toto the Hero* (*Toto le héros*, Jaco van Dormael, 1991) and *Il caso Mattei* (Francesco Rosi, 1972) examples of metatexts, which integrate the process of storytelling (the first) and filmmaking (the second) within them, developing a particular reflection on narration through a complex manipulation of their temporal structure.

Thus, to study the configuration of time inevitably means stopping time. The researcher is responsible for untangling the interplay of the different time streams and for bringing to a head the many marks of the enunciation scattered throughout the text, in order to identify the mode or modes of production of meaning in the film. This demands the use of theoretical models suitable for the description of how the film narrative works and the use of practical tools which allow the researcher 'to act' on the work, to exercise her own gaze. In the attempt to find a concrete confirmation of the questions raised, one possibility is to use a digital tool capable of helping the researcher in the determination and manage-

[1] Ph.D dissertation supervised by Professor Alessandra Lischi and Professor Lorenzo Cuccu. For information: liviagiunti@gmail.com.

ment of the several codes and sub-codes at work in the film, assisting her in the practice and verification of a rigorous and articulate method.

Together with the study of the configuration of time it is necessary to develop a reflection on the tools and techniques used for film analysis, in order to understand what fiction film analysis has been and is today, and to explore what methods, languages and tools have crossed the discipline. In examining the new digital media outline — an outline where new tools, new approaches and different modes of production, storing and reception of audiovisual contents have developed — I focused in particular on some annotation and analysis software which enable to connect historical and theoretical discourses with practice.

The project was initially conceived for a pre-existing tool, the *DCP* (Digital Cinema Project) developed by the University of Pisa,[2] a software which enables the user to analyse a film through a grid of predefined parameters. Thereafter we tested other softwares developed in the last decade, to verify: 1) the speed and precision of certain practices, such as automatic and manual unit segmentation (*shot detection*); 2) their capability and usefulness in managing and intersecting the numerous data that emerge from the different planes of observation, at the level of unit segmentation and at the level of stratification, together with the survey of the occurrences and isotopies, with particular attention to the configuration of time (*usability* and *data mining*); and finally 3) the possibility of making the analysis verifiable 'in the field' and repeatable through data access for future analysis.[3]

During the description of this practice I aimed to offer a constant comparison between manual analysis and computer-assisted analysis, testing the theoretical categories related to segmentation and configuration of time, which the software has helped to define. Last but not least, my colleagues involved in the project and I followed the hypothesis that the software may help not only to promote new practices, but also to implement new methods, not solely statistical, which is normally the main application of these kind of tools. This cross-sectional study of software has resulted in a collaboration with the LIRIS laboratory of computer engineering at the University Claude Bernard Lyon 1, which has developed, according to my tests and research, the best tool for this type of analysis: a software called *Advene*. On the basis of the reflections developed during the research, this

[2] *DCP* is a software developed by Leonardo Grilli based on a project by Lorenzo Garzella (coordinator) with the supervision of Professor Lorenzo Cuccu. The project was financed by Cofin 2002 (National coordinator Professor Francesco Casetti, Local supervisor Professor Cuccu) and was presented at the Udine Film Forum in 2004.

[3] The research avails itself of the comparison among four softwares of which we described and analysed the concept, the main functions, the possible applications and the strengths and weaknesses relating to the theoretical and practical issues that emerged along the way. Aside from *DCP*, the other three softwares taken into consideration are: *Cinemetrics*, a web-application created in 2005 by Yuri Tsivian and Gunars Civjan; *Lignes de temps* developed by IRI (Centre Pompidou) in 2007 and *Advene* developed by the LIRIS laboratory of the University Claude Bernard Lyon 1 in 2002, created by Olivier Aubert, Pierre-Antoine Champin and Yannick Prié.

collaboration has led to the implementation of certain functions and the integration of new ones in order to make the tool more suitable for cinema studies. It has thus improved the study of such complex themes as the configuration of time.[4]

The use of an integrated tool such as *Advene* has immensely enriched the historical, theoretical and methodological reflection, as well as the concrete practice of film analysis. In fact, by using *Advene* it is possible to experiment with a true 'grasp on the film' both through the determination and management of the different analytical categories and through specific memory tools that show the methodological paths, enabling the user to reflect on its own method and workflow. Moreover, the instant recall of plans or sequences together with the annotation and analysis data, the possibility of browsing the film through key-words and filters, and the choice of different ways of data and query results visualisation, foster the practice of analysis. So the digital tool becomes more than a mere statistical or *mise en forme* tool: it is a real assisting instrument for the practice of analysis.

In conclusion, the dynamic computer screen — a virtual page which displays all the categories and their intersections — together with a specific tool such as *Advene*, are able to give life to that 'constellation of elements' that Ėjzenštejn, Vertov and Barthes tried to achieve on paper. That constellation, together with *Advene*'s specific functionality of creating *hypervideos*, can help the researcher to constitute that *artefact intermédiaire* that analysts and film critics always wanted to attain (just think of Bellour, Aumont and Godard, for instance). An *hypervideo*, or *augmented video*, is in fact an interactive audiovisual model where film and analysis coexist in the same space and time, so that the stream and the split instants, the whole and its parts, the sequential film text and its database of codes and sub-codes stay in mutual relation, exceeding the limits of media such as sequential video and paper. The *Advene* project finally paves the way to an entirely computer-led critical investigation and the computer, usually considered by humanists as a mere data processor and presentation tool, is able to renew research and teaching, encouraging new approaches and new interpretations.

[4] In fact *Advene* had been used mainly for the annotation and analysis of audiovisual streams in social, anthropological, psychological and the performative arts fields.