Objects in Films: Analyzing Signs

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Resumo:

O foco deste artigo é a análise de objetos cotidianos como signos em filmes. Os objetos da vida diária adquirem várias funções nos filmes: eles podem ser simplesmente utilizados como objetos de cena ou apoiar um determinado estilo de filme. Outros objetos são especialmente escolhidos para traduzir o caráter dos personagens ou o compromisso ético-estético do diretor com a narrativa. Para entender tais funções e compromissos, desenvolvemos uma metodologia da análise de filmes que se concentra nos objetos. A interpretação de objetos como o ponto de partida da análise fílmica não é uma prática nova. Por exemplo, o crítico francês André Bazin propôs o uso da interpretação de objetos nos filmes nos anos 1950. O teórico alemão Siegfried Kracauer também se utilizou desse tipo de interpretação nos anos 1960. Entretanto, não há atualmente nenhum modelo analítico existente para ser utilizado na interpretação de objetos nos filme. A metodologia aqui proposta procura pelos objetos mais representativos nos filmes, o que implica tanto análise quantitativa como qualitativa; consideramos o número de vezes que cada objeto aparece em um filme (análise quantitativa) bem como o contexto da sua presença, isto é, o tipo de filmagem utilizada e como isto cria uma maior ou menor relevância e/ou expressividade (análise qualitativa). Além dos critérios de relevância e expressividade, também analisamos a funcionalidade dos objetos, explorando detalhes e especificando os variados papéis desempenhados pelos objetos nos filmes. Esta pesquisa foi desenvolvida na Concordia University, Montreal, Canadá e apoiada pelo **Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canadá** (DFAIT).

Palavras-chave: Análise fílmica; Metodologia; Comunicação.

Abstract:

The focus of this essay is the analysis of daily objects as signs in films. Objects from everyday life acquire several functions in films: they can be solely used as scene objects or to support a particular film style. Other objects are specially chosen to translate a character's interior state of mind or the filmmaker's aesthetical or ethical commitment to narrative concepts. In order to understand such functions and commitments, we developed a methodology for film analysis which focuses on the objects. Object interpretation, as the starting point of film analysis, is not a new approach. For instance, French film critic André Bazin proposed that use of object interpretation in the 1950s. Similarly, German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer stated it in the 1960s. However, there is currently no existing analytical model to use when engaging in object interpretation in film. This methodology searches for the most representative objects in films which involves both quantitative and qualitative analysis; we consider the number of times each object appears in a film (quantitative analysis) as well as the context of their appearance, i.e. the type of shot used and how that creates either a larger or smaller relevance and/or expressiveness (qualitative analysis). In addition to the criteria of *relevance* and

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expressiveness, we also analyze the *functionality* of an object by exploring details and specifying the role various objects play in films. This research was developed at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada and was supported by the **Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada** (DFAIT).

Key words: Film analysis; Methodology; Communication.

Objects in Films

Undoubtedly, we are surrounded by objects and consequently surrounded by history and many stories. In this sense, an object is more than color, shape, texture, material, and functionality. It is reason, ideology, context, emotion, and sensation; above all it is communication "just as a story, an object is a text, a way of exhibiting shapes, and a vehicle of transmission of meanings" (Glassie, 1999: 46). For this reason, objects and other elements of a film can provide an interpretative gaze.

Moreover, objects are sensorial and emotional instruments of construction, preservation, and differentiation of identities. "Any object of design will give off an impression of the psychological and moral attitudes it supports" (Botton, 2006: 72). If we can judge the personality of objects from seemingly minuscule features, it is because we first acquire this skill in relation to evaluating other humans, whose character we can evaluate starting with microscopic aspects of their face and body. Objects help us identify and characterize a material culture in time and space, and we maintain a very close connection with objects in daily life, perhaps only surpassed by our relationships with other people. This power of mobilization of objects likely comes from the pleasant sensations of continuity or permanence that can emanate from an object.

In films, objects can translate the characters' interior state of mind in a concomitant way that is both revealing/dissimulating, explicit/implicit; a game whose rules are based on the ethical-esthetical commitment to a conceptual narrative. Objects are signs that represent ideas, ideals and translate intended meaning in a film. The audience is in front of the idea of this object that is visually transmuted and transposed to the screen. Therefore, the object-sign on the screen is often only partially an object of reality. Often times it carries with itself data that goes beyond the aesthetics of reality; data that are formed inside the infrastructure of the fictional image.

Analysis of objects

Object interpretation, as the starting point of film analysis, is not a new approach. For instance, French film critic André Bazin (1918-1958) proposed that use of object

interpretation in the 1950s. Similarly, German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966) stated it in the 1960s. However, there is currently no existing analytical model to use when engaging in object interpretation in film.

To analyze films is to transform an iconical and indexical experience into a symbolic one which is able to be verbally expressed. Martin Lefebvre, when discussing landscape and film, evokes Eisenstein's consideration that both film landscape and film music share the ability to express, in cinematic form, what is otherwise inexpressible (Lefebvre, 2006: xii). For the purpose of this study, I will add the presence of ordinary objects in film, in that they can also express the otherwise inexpressible. In thinking about film, Stanley Cavell (1926-) used the expression "reality of the unsayable" to describe this film characteristic (Rothman, 2005: xxiv).

Indeed, André Bazin emphasizes the use of objects in a scene when analyzing, for instance, the relationship of Charlot – Charlie Chaplin's (1889-1977) eternal character – in short-length films such as *One A.M.* (1916), *Police!* (1916), *The Pawnshop* (1916), *The Adventurer* (1917), *A Day's Pleasure* (1919), and *Sunnyside* (1919). Siegfried Kracauer was a film theorist who specialized in the crucial role of physical reality and moments of everyday life in his film theory. In 1960, he released *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, which argued that realism is the most important function of cinema. He formed a general theory based upon dozens of smaller examples; his attention to detail lends itself to an inductive method.

In discussing the material culture in films, Kracauer argues that film may fulfill a timely mission in helping us apprehend and appreciate material objects. He is emphatic: "The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imaginary permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life" (Kracauer, 1960: 300). Products of habit form a resilient texture. As Kracauer states, "films tend to explore this texture of everyday life, whose composition varies according to place, people, and time. So they help us not only to appreciate our given material environment but to extend it in all directions. They virtually make the world our home" (1960: 304). He celebrates the small moments of material life in film. Kracauer was also one of the first to see cinema as a mirror of social conditions and desires.

In *Montage 1938*, Eisenstein points out that montage is an essential component of filmmaking. To explain his ideas, he provides us with significant examples of how the object, a clock, is used in different situations both in literature and cinema. Specifically, he references the following passage from the Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873/7):

> Let us recall Vronsky after Anna Karenina has told him that she is pregnant. At the start of Chapter 24 of Part 2 *Anna Karenina* we find just such an instance: "When Vronsky looked at the clock on the Karenina's balcony, he was so disturbed and preoccupied with his thoughts that he saw the hands on the clock-face but could not tell what the time was." The *image* of time, which the clock was creating, did not arise in his mind. All he could see was the geometric depiction represented by the face and hands of the clock. (Eisenstein, 1991: 300)

He then comments on the use of a clock in his own film, *October* (1927):

> Talking of clocks and time, I cannot help recalling an example from my own work. In the Winter Palace, when we were filming *October* (1927), we came across a curious antique clock. The large central clock-face was surrounded by a circle made up of smaller dials, each one of which was marked by the name of a city; Paris, London, New York, and so on. Each of these dials showed the time in those cities, compared with the time in Moscow or St Petersburg (I forgot which), which was indicated on the main clock-face. I remembered the appearance of that clock, and when in the film I wanted to stress with particular force the historic moment of victory and the establishment of Soviet rule, the clock prompted me to use a unique montage device: the hour at which the Provisional Government fell, shown by Petrograd time, was repeated by the entire series of smaller dials, on which that hour was displayed in the different times that applied to London, Paris, New York, etc. Thus, that hour, unique in the history and fate of all nations, stood out through all the multiplicity of separate time-zones as though uniting and merging all the peoples of the world in the perception of that moment, the moment of victory of the working class. This idea was also picked up by the circular movement of the ring of smaller dials, a movement which, increasing in speed, added a further graphic dimension to the fusion of all the different indications of time into an awareness of that single historic hour… (Eisenstein, 1991: 304)

Eisenstein was aware of the presence of objects in film sets and their importance in influencing an audience's perception according to the filmmaker's purposes. He comments that "an advantage of studying the design of film sets is that it can be presented graphically, that is why I always begin with it" (Eisenstein, 1991: 22).

In *Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits* (*Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives*) literary scholar and semiologist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) considers the role objects play in a narrative (literature, cinema, comics, myth, fairytale, etc.). He specifically emphasizes the indexical and metaphorical role that objects can play. The French photographer, filmmaker and critic, Alan Fleischer (1944-), also analyzes films

from the point of view of objects. He uses the relevant expressions *dramaturgie des objets* and *imaginaire des objets*. He considers that, in the context of film, objects are auxiliaries that make the narrative and symbolism work. Their role and their manipulation define the identity and draw the actions of the users, the manipulators. For Fleischer, an object is a *being*, an object of supreme desire and the mechanism of film fiction always consists in crossing a space-time barrier to drive the hero until he reaches the final union with his object of desire (Fleischer, 2004: 84-6). Fleischer points out that objects do not only punctuate the action but they construct it; they are the support, the proof of it. Objects belong to the *real* world, but they first function in our minds, in our projects, in our desires, in our dreams (Fleischer, 2004: 87-103).

Methodology for film analysis[1]

To begin, my methodology searches for the most representative objects in films. To achieve this goal, I make use of quantitative and qualitative analysis. I consider the number of times each object appears in a film (quantitative analysis) as well as the context of their appearance, i.e. the type of shot used to provide objects with a larger or smaller relevance and expressiveness (qualitative analysis). In addition to the criteria of relevance and expressiveness, I also analyze the functionality by exploring details and specifying the role various objects play in films. I have sketched out the sequence of each criterion and function that I propose as methodological elements for analysis:

1. Criterion of relevance.

The principles and maxims of relevance are Quality (truthfulness), Quantity (informativeness), Relation (relevance) and Manner (clarity) (see Sperber & Wilson: 1986). Thus this criterion depends on the results of the quantitative analysis; in other words, the number of times that objects appear in a film. An object with a high number of appearances has larger potentiality to be an important item which was consciously used by the filmmaker to communicate certain intentions. For instance, in the film *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2007), pointed cowboy boots appear several times with emphasis. They are masculine boots with a fine beak; they are especially pointed and we can infer they are phallic. The murderer (antagonist) and the protagonist wear the same kind of boots. Both are virile and their boots are the trophy which represents the victory of their masculinity, their power and their vigor.

On the other hand, an object can be relevant, or even central, by appearing only one time but with great emphasis. Further, one should consider if objects have relevance,

large or small, in the context in which they are inserted. The distinction between close-ups, inserts and background objects is not the point here because all objects are submitted to the evaluation of relevance: if they are framed in a close-up or even if they appear as background objects. The most important aspect considered is their communicative potential. Sperber & Wilson (1986) assume in their relevance theory that, intuitively, relevance is a potential property not only of utterances and other observable phenomena, but of thoughts, memories and conclusions of inferences. Any external stimulus or internal representation which provides an input to cognitive processes may be relevant to an individual at some time. An input (a sight, an image, a sound, an utterance, a memory) is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him. Relevance theory claims that what makes an input worth picking out from the mass of competing stimuli is not just that it is relevant, but that it is *more* relevant than any alternative input available to us at that time. In different circumstances, the same stimulus may be more or less salient, the same contextual assumptions more or less accessible, and the same cognitive effects easier or harder to derive. The authors conclude that the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition, which communicators may exploit. Filmmakers are above all communicators.

Yet for instance, if the theme of a film is death, and a bottle of milk appears several times, is that an object specifically chosen to *co-act* with death? Or "the drop of milk in Eisenstein's *The General Line* (1926-29) finds itself endowed with a sense of refusal and adhesion, as well as a sovereign life" (Morin, 1978: 188). In short, the excessiveness, as well as the exclusiveness, may be indicators of the relevance, but the degree of that relevance will depend on the way the object is related to the context of the film. If such objects go by that sieve, we start to analyze them for their expressiveness, the second criterion of qualitative analysis.

2. Criterion of expressiveness.

This criterion is connected to Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956) dramaturgical principles to identify how an object can cause impact, how it calls the spectator's attention to the shot or cinematographic montage. Brecht, besides theater, wrote several film projects, including projects in association with Fritz Lang (1890-1976). The first objective of the Brechtian principle of dramaturgical composition is to affect, to stimulate interactivity. The origin of this exploratory attitude towards interactivity explores the various origins of curiosity, interest; of what affects and engages.

When considering the film *No Country for Old Men*, the character Llewellyn Moss (Josh Brolin), is seen checking into a motel while trying to escape from the murderer, Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem). While he talks to the receptionist, we see a little cat drinking milk from a bowl placed exactly beside Llewellyn. In the sequence, the little cat appears drinking the milk spilled on the floor and the bowl is empty. The viewer realizes at that moment that the murderer has already found the motel and killed the receptionist. So in this example it is the subtle choice of object placement, which provides insight into a key event in the plot. Now is too late to literally cry over spilled milk!

A filmmaker can give us various shots of the same object – some emphasizing clarity, others emphasizing expressiveness. Rudolf Arnheim (1904-2007) defines expression as "modes of organic or inorganic behavior displayed in the dynamic appearance of perceptual objects or events" (2004: 445) and he adds that "if expression is the primary content of vision in daily life, the same should all the more true of the way the artist looks at the world. The expressive qualities are his means of communication" (2004: 455). Objects should be considered more or less inside this criterion if their occurrences are more or less expressive than expected. However, the impact that an object is capable of causing can be showed in different ways. Thus, I subdivided expressiveness into the following subcategories:

2.1. Distanciation

This is a strategy built from deviation of standard use of cinematographic language (frame, montage, and edition) whose objective is to call the spectator's attention to some aspect of the object inside the scene. For instance, if an object appears in unusual shots, it seems to be *nonsense*. We will consider the distanciation in one scene of *Falsche Bewegung* (*Wrong Movement*, Wim Wenders, 1975) as an example. The scene shows a group of travelers in a living room. In this scene, we see that the television is on but the curious thing is that the TV shows nothing at all, just blue and gray flickering flashes. In addition to the lack of sense occurring on the TV, we see that the TV itself is still covered in its plastic protective wrapping. This particular TV contextualizes a kind of critic that is out of the film. We can interpret that the film is criticizing how some objects lose their real objective (information and entertainment) and turn into an ornament. This aspect enters a bigger dimension when we relate it to the theme that is being discussed by the travelers in the living room. They are talking about loneliness in Germany.

Brecht established his concept of *distanciation effect* (from the German *Verfremdungseffekt*) as a theatrical and cinematic device which prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer. The term *Verfremdungseffekt* is rooted in the Russian formalist notion of *making strange*, in other words, all the reactions provoked by the text when presenting something strange in relation to what was expected. In short, it means estrangement, denaturalization of conventions. Not long after seeing a performance by Mei Lanfang's company in Moscow in the spring of 1935, Brecht coined the German term to label an approach to theater that discouraged involving the audience in an illusory narrative world and in the emotions of the characters.

2.2. Particularization

This term relates to a detail that shows something out of the ordinary, for instance, when an extreme close-up is so close and slow that it causes a deformation in the object image. In regard to the example of milk: if the camera produces an extreme zoom of a bottle of milk so that we only see a white surface, would such a scene cause an impact concerning the theme of death?

The concept of shot is quite ample and it is widely used in different contexts, but for the purpose of our discussion, I will consider that a shot simultaneously designates a certain point of view of an event and a certain duration of time. In terms of scale or proportion, the close-up or the "close-up point of view" is extremely relevant in characterizing the expressivity of an object in a film. Also in terms of mobility, the zoom has often been read as the "focusing in" of a character's attention and even affects the viewer's attention. In terms of duration, a "long take" or *plan-séquence* can be representative of the filmmaker's intention to direct the audience's attention to some specific object or group of objects.

2.3. Surprise

Surprise is an unexpected event related to an object that astonishes us, causing admiration and/or fright. Moreover, surprise can result from the shock that the disposition of a certain object can raise in a scene. Such surprise reveals what was possibly hidden. The film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, Wim Wenders, 1987) brings us an old man searching for his own time which was lost at the end of the *Postdamer Platz* of his youth in Berlin. Surprisingly, he appears sitting in a traditional spacious armchair with large armrests in the middle of the deserted square, unnoticed.

The design of the armchair, the old man's thoughts, and the old man himself are relaxed, forgotten, and lost. Surprise is also rendered when the audience sees a character interacting with an object that does not match his/her profile; the spectator is surprised as a character's unknown facets are revealed: a priest with a gun, a child smoking a cigarette, etc.

Marcel Martin defines an expressive montage as a tactic to achieve emotions, though it is "not a means but an end…aiming to express by itself – and by the collision of two images – some emotion or idea" (Martin, 1977: 131). There is a kind of montage that is aimed at producing aesthetic shocks or collisions and those effects can corroborate to produce surprise in the audience. Filmmakers are able to direct the audience by way of all the "ingredients" which characterize the cinema: *mise en scène*, photography, camera movement, acting, editing, sound, etc.

2.4. Ecstasy

Ecstasy is described as the exaltation of sensations and feelings. In the production of excitement, communication is rendered concrete. Roland Barthes (1982) calls such excitement, in the context of the picture, a *punctum*: it is what directly reaches the observer and jumps towards them. The *punctum* of an image is not the same for everybody, as it depends on the private interest of each person. It is through the *punctum,* however, that the observer establishes communication with the image, surrendering to it. Similarly, we can consider that, in films, there are scenes in which objects work as *punctum,* attracting the spectator's attention, although Barthes didn't mention it. In this case, ecstasy is the best translation of the current sensation. The color of the object, its shape, a small detail, and its disposition in the atmosphere, all of these elements can work as *punctum* snatching the spectator's sense and sensibility, mobilizing their desire. Barthes' *punctum* triggers the play of chance and subjective association, thereby infusing the image with personal desire. Let us mention again the film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*): the character Damiel, who falls down from heaven, exchanges his armor (his exclusive belongings) for clothing and more appropriate accessories of the terrestrial world, acquires a watch and admires it as a jewel. In an expressive scene, the character is confronted with a clock that is projected onto the screen of an exposed television set in a shop window. He stops, as he is fascinated with the unusual situation and checks his watch, comparing the hours, trying to establish his position in space and time, which is so different from the permanent time of his origin. The ecstasy caused by all the details of the clock, more than considering the

chronology of the elapsed time, reveals to the audience the lack of temporality in human relationships.

Eisenstein defined the notion of ecstasy as the highest degree of intellectual and emotional activity the spectator can experience. An activity is said to be "ecstatic" because it consists of "exit[ing] out of yourself" in accordance with Greek etymology *ek-stasis*. Thus, the spectator surpasses himself, getting lost in a force which exceeds him. "An attraction (…) is in our understanding any demonstrable fact (an action, an object, a phenomenon, a conscious combination, and so on) that is known and proven to exercise a definite effect on the attention and emotions of the audience and that, combined with others, possesses the characteristic of concentrating the audience's emotions in any direction dictated by the production's purpose" (Eisenstein, 1988: 40-1).

3. Criterion of functionality

A relevant and expressive object certainly will execute one or more function inside the context of the film. It means that functionality is incorporated into both the criteria of relevance and expressiveness. We will be convinced that such an object will become a strong candidate to be an *object of desire*, in other words, an element consciously selected by the filmmaker. Such an object is chosen not only for its scenographic qualities, materiality or physical qualities, but also for its communicative value. The following subcategories illustrate the various components of functionality:

3.1. Scenographic function

This is the most trivial function that an object can fulfill in a film. It is linked to the creation and adaptation of the scenario in relation to an environment. For instance, the director that simply likes the use of a bottle of milk as a prop can place it inside a refrigerator, i.e. the most probable place to find a bottle of milk. In his work, *Montage 1937*, Eisenstein provides us with an interesting example about how objects play an important role in film scenarios. For example, in one of his classes, Eisenstein discusses the significance of a table for a particular set. The exercise centered on an adaptation of Balzac's novel, *Père Goriot*. The scene is set at a dinner table that Balzac described as circular, but Eisenstein argued that a round table would be not the best option because it implies equality. He suggested the use of a long rectangular table, with the haughty mistress of the house at the head, the favored tenants close to her sides, and the lowly Goriot alone, near the base of the table (Eisenstein, 1991: 16-20).

Thus, settings are not merely backdrops for the action, but can be significant extensions of the theme and characterization of the text. In the context of cinema, settings can convey an immense amount of information. The set can present the character before he has appeared. It may indicate social position, tastes, habits, lifestyle, and personality. Even the furniture of a room can be exploited for psychological and thematic reasons. Therefore, the presence of objects is much more than a background or scenario in films.

3.2. Semantic function

 This function tries to establish a meaning between the object and the image in which it appears (sign). Semantic function works on a level of denotation and connotation with the metaphorical, metonymical and synecdochial capacity of the scenic assembly. This function works with a series of known, and already crystallized, combinations in the filmic language. Baudrillard suggests the importance of "consider[ing] the object for a moment: the object as a humble and receptive supporting actor, as a sort of psychological slave or confident" (Baudrillard, 1997: 27). For instance, milk can be a symbol of purity. If the bottle of milk is broken, we can infer that such purity was corrupted. A montage, therefore, narrates structurally and intentionally. So, it is important to analyze the montage as a semiotic possibility, as a communicative action: a way of thinking and not simply a way of showing (Eva, 2007: 65-9). The montage of attractions – an effective way of producing semantic meaning – is characterized by the effects (attractions) with a precise aim of specific final thematic effect that the montage can produce. "The method of the montage of attractions is the comparison of subjects for thematic effect" (Eisenstein, 1988: 43). The montage of attractions is the contrasting comparisons that often produce a powerful emotional effect.

3.3. Synesthetic function

This refers to the awakening of new sensations, other than those sensations that an object more commonly provokes. The synesthetic function is also appellative because it seeks to deeply reach our perception, working our visual, verbal, chromatic, olfactory and musical repertoires, among others, to cause emotion and commotion. Which sensation would a bottle of milk evoke if placed in the context of a cold European climate and an operatic soundtrack? Further, how is this same bottle interpreted when placed in the setting of a sunny day with an *allegro* of sweet flute as a soundtrack? Indeed, visual and sensory input seeds our language with metaphors.

3.4. Referential function

This function refers to other arts, languages, and contexts that are separate from the film. For Jakobson, referential function refers to the notion of context. This function is the criterion that measures the intensity of the incorporation and demarcation of references from other texts, as in intermedial studies. The intertext and the phenomenon of intertextuality can be found in both Julia Kristeva's (1941-) and Roland Barthes' vocabulary. This phenomenon allows one to say that any text has been worked on by other texts, by way of absorption and transformation of a multiplicity of other texts. For Barthes, every text is an intertext: other texts are present in variable levels which are more or less recognizable. Kristeva (1984) defines intertextuality as the transposition of one or more system of signs into another. Referential function can be more intense, as the intertext is mentioned and interpreted more frequently. Depending on the degree of this function, intermedial occurrences can be detected; in other words, there are processes to constitute meanings through the contact between a film and other means of communication, for instance, by way of citations, allusions, and parodies.

A well-known example would be all the films that make reference to Hitchcock's shower scene in *Psycho* (1960). Such films include *Phantom of the Paradise* (Brian De Palma, 1974), *Blow Out* (Brian De Palma, 1981), *Fade to Black* (Vernon Zimmerman, 1980), and *The Prowler* (Joseph Zito, 1981). In *Les invasions barbares* (*The Barbarian Invasions*, Denys Arcand, 2003), which is a film laden with references, Arcand uses scenes from *The Life of Maria Goretti* (1949), a biopic and dubbed version of Augusto Genina's *Cielo sulla palude* (1949). He shows Françoise Hardy on TV singing "All the boys and girls" and the character Rémy mentions the actresses Ines Orsini and Julie Christie, the tennis player Chris Evert, the ballerina Karen Kain, for example. Other characters cite Sartre, Camus, Marcuse, Godard, Machiavelli and also artists, such as da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael. In Rémy's apartment we can see close-ups of various books, such as *Si c'est un home* (Primo Levi), *Les miserables* (Victor Hugo), *Histoire et utopie* (E. M. Cioran), *The Gulag Archipelago* (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn) and *Journal II: 1665-1669* (Samuel Pepys). Such references, and more broadly such use of objects, help the spectator to build the character's identity. They can also orient the spectator's interpretation or be seen as authorial comment or signature as in Jean-Luc Godard (1930-).

3.5. Dialogical function

This function intends to re-contextualize the reference. This criterion considers Bakhtin's dialogism (a differential relationship between texts) to identify the resulting tension that emerges from the confrontation of the reference's meaning in the original context versus

its meaning in film (a new context). In fact, the term, intertextuality, began as Kristeva's translation of the Bakhtinian notions of dialogism and heteroglossia. Bakhtin defines dialogism as the necessary relationship of any one utterance to other utterances. An utterance can refer to any complex combination of signs, from a spoken phrase to a poem, song, play or film.

For instance, the acclaimed Brazilian film, *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station* – Walter Salles, 1998) shows the character Dora, an elderly teacher who is payed by illiterates to write and send letters per post to their families. She writes, receives the money but she does not necessarily send the letters. At first Dora judges, as a divine entity, and then decides the destiny of each letter: garbage, drawer or post. In a film set in a religious environment, the use of garbage, drawer and post dialogically correspond to the dogmatic states of hell, purgatory and heaven.

The degree of intertextual dialogicity may vary: As stated by Malaguti, "the reference will attest dialogical tension if a critical positioning in the re-contextualizing happens; if it only confirms the sense of the old context, the reference will have a low degree of intertextual dialogicity" (1998: 41).

3.6. Ideological function

This function contemplates objects which are able to express ideological concepts in film. An ideological function serves as an interdependent system of ideas (beliefs, traditions or myths) supported by a social group of any nature or dimension that reflects, rationalizes and defends its own interests and institutional commitments (religious, political or economical). Although ideology is generally associated with politics and party platforms, it can also mean a given set of values that are implicit in any human enterprise – including filmmaking.

Baudrillard argues that "we have considered objects from the point of view of their objective systematization, from that of their subjective systematization and also from their ideological significance" (1997:109). For the author, ideology involves social dimension, an ethical system, democracy, luxury, materialism, power, satisfaction, frustration, and status quo. Raymond Williams argues that the term ideology can be understood in three senses: (1) a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group; (2) a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge and (3) the general process of meaning and

ideas (Williams, 1983: 152-7). Films are highly variable in their degree of ideological explicitness. Marc Vernet ponders that the analysis of ideology in film springs from two preceding points to the extent that it is simultaneously directed at the control of the spectator's psychic play and the circulation of a certain social representation (Aumont et al., 1992: 76-7). Editing styles – specifically the Soviet[2] montage – can be profoundly ideological, like the Odessa steps sequence from *The Battleship Potemkin*. Costumes and décor can suggest ideological ideas, as can be seen in movies like *The Leopard* (Luchino Visconti, 1963). Even space is ideologically charged in such films as *The Grifters* (Stephen Frears, 1990) and *Henry V* (Laurence Olivier, 1944). In other words, political ideas can be found in form as well as content. Concerning the notion that a "montage of attractions" is related to both theatre and cinema, Eisenstein points out: "An attraction (…) is any aggressive moment in theater, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole. These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion" (Eisenstein, 1988: 34).

3.7. Authorial function

This considers the filmmaker/author's relationship with his/her own film. This criterion refers to the relevance of the interferences of the author's own personal data in films and also to his/her appearance on screen. We are, therefore, speaking about a relationship of elements inside the film which refer to the outside reality. The authorial signs will be more intense if the filmmaker appears in the film (like Hitchcock, for example), if he/she acts in the scene, if he/she touches or moves objects, if his/her voice comments upon scenes, or if some objects, landscapes and other autobiographical items were inserted into the film. Depending on the criterion of expressiveness, an object will gain more or less relevance in the authorial function. In the context of *Les invasions barbares*, Denys Arcand appears two times in the film: in the first scene, at the hospital, he is a union worker who carries kitchen equipment without speaking, and in the second instance he returns a stolen laptop to the protagonist's son and pronounces a short phrase.

3.8. Aesthetic function

This function refers to the object's design. This criterion seeks the constituent materiality of objects through the shape, color, texture, material, dimensions and functionality. This function is also concerned with the aesthetic movement in which objects are inserted, and through which we are able to detect artistic intention, theoretical presuppositions,

and the cultural origins of the aesthetic manifestation. The design of objects does not have the intension of maintaining significance for an unlimited time; rather, as an expression of a particular culture, in a particular time, it ends up reflecting the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of that time. Indeed, this function is also applied with the intention of recognizing the *Zeitgeist* of the objects.

These proposed criteria aim to provide the initial steps towards a typology to differentiate and evaluate the visual occurrences of objects in fictional environments. For instance, I will consider important films that German filmmaker Wim Wenders produced during the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* (*The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty*, 1971), *Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*, 1974), *Falsche Bewegung* (*Wrong Movement*, 1975) and *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, 1987). The aesthetic movement of the 1970s and 1980s can be considered as post-modernism, with the rejection to the modernists' utopian objectives of looking for universal aesthetics and exerting into the production more playful, colorful and funny objects. However, the design of the objects that we see in these films is a reflex of the previous movements: namely modernism and German functionalism. The spirit of the modern movement – characteristic of the reconstruction of postwar Germany – is based on utilitarianism, the absence of ornaments, the use of metallic and synthetic materials in architecture and design. Methodologically, functionalism bases itself on rational and quantifiable criteria to produce objects with rigorous functionality. In regard to style, functionalism seeks neatness, cleanliness, and purity through the use of geometric shapes, adoption of the orthogonal structure, modulation, basic colors (above all, black and white) and technological materials. The functionalist German legacy - dominant theory of modernism - constitutes the structural base in which the industrial design was developed by *Bauhaus* (1919) and *Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm* (1953), to its apex in the 1960s. Thus, the objects of these films such as armchairs and suitcases excel in sobriety of colors and shapes, reflecting exactly the German *Zeitgeist*.

3.9. Advertising function

This function refers to the product placement or embedded marketing, i.e. promotional advertisements that are placed in media (including films) using real commercial products and services. Product placement occurs with the inclusion of a brand's logo in a shot, or a favorable mention or appearance of a product in a shot. This is normally done without disclosure, and under the premise that it is a natural part of the work. Most major films

released today contain product placements, although a few countries, notably the United Kingdom, do not permit product placement in domestically produced films.

The first notable film to feature product placement was *Wings* (William A. Wellman, 1927), which contained a plug for Hershey's chocolate. Indeed, certain products are featured more than others and commonly seen products include automobiles, consumer electronics and computers, beverages and food, and tobacco products. The James Bond films pioneered automobiles placement. *The Man with the Golden Gun* (Guy Hamilton, 1974), for example, featured extensive use of AMC cars, even in scenes in Thailand, where AMC cars were not sold, and had the steering wheel on the wrong side of the vehicle for the country's roads. In *The Matrix Reloaded* (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 2003) every vehicle was produced by General Motors. For example, we can notice that important scenes feature brand new Cadillac CTS cars, a Cadillac Escalade EXT and a Ducati motorcycle. Vehicles can represent the power, the virility and the status of a character, for example, and so product placement may be significant in an ideological way.

On the other hand, we have the example of *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) which utilized the concept of product placement in a manner different than other films. The film's focus, a 24-hour television broadcast called "The Truman Show" is centered on the life of Truman Burbank, and uses faux product placement. His wife places products in front of the hidden cameras, even naming certain products in dialogue with her husband, all of which increases Truman's suspicion as he comes to realize his surroundings are intentionally fabricated. Danny Boyle, director of *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), calls "product displacement" when companies such as Mercedes Benz refuse to allow their products to be used in non-flattering settings. While they did not mind having a gangster driving their cars, they objected to their products been shown in a slum setting. This forced the makers of the film to remove Mercedes logos digitally in the post-production phase, costing effort and money. In short, the focus of this advertising function is to identify how relevant and expressive a placed product can be.

Methodological considerations

As presented earlier, the proposed process involves both quantitative and qualitative analysis; in addition to the criteria of *relevance* and *expressiveness*, I also analyze the *functionality* of an object by exploring details and specifying the role various objects play in films. It is important to clear up that all those criteria are available to help us to understand the role of objects in films, but it doesn't mean that all them will be

appropriated to every film; it just mean that they can be applied according to the characteristics of each film, i.e. at the end of the analysis it is possible to conclude that some categories were not necessary to be applied. To facilitate the use, the following table explains and summarizes the proposed taxonomy:

TAXONOMY FOR ANALYZING OBJECTS IN FILM		
CRITERION OF RELEVANCE		
This criterion is based on the number of times objects appear in a film. Excessiveness, as well as exclusiveness, may be indicators of relevance.		
Example	If the theme of a film is death, and a bottle of milk appears prominently several times, it is probably an object specifically chosen to *co-act* with death.	
CRITERION OF EXPRESSIVENESS		
This criterion aims to identify how an object can cause impact; how it calls forth the spectator's attention. This can occur in different ways, thus we subdivided expressiveness into the following subcategories:		
Distanciation	This is a strategy which deviates from the standard use of frame, montage, and edition. The objective here is to call the spectator's attention to an object. It is based on Brecht's concept of *distanciation effect.*	
	Example	If objects appear in unusual shots it seems to be *nonsense*, yet there is an underlying intent.
Particularization	This strategy is related to a detail that shows something out of the ordinary.	
	Example	When an extreme close-up is so close and slow that it causes a deformation in the image of the object.
Surprise	An unexpected event related to an object that astonishes us, causing admiration and/or fright.	
	Example	When a character interacts with an object that doesn't match his/her profile: a priest with a gun, a child smoking a cigarette, etc.
Ecstasy	Eisenstein defined the notion of ecstasy as the highest degree of intellectual and emotional activity the spectator can experience.	
	Example	The color of an object, its shape, a small detail, and its disposition in the atmosphere; these elements can

		capture the spectator's sense and sensibility, in turn mobilizing their desire.
CRITERION OF FUNCIONALITY		
This criterion is based on the concept that a relevant and expressive object will execute one or more function(s) within a film.		
Scenographic function		This function is linked to the creation and adaptation of a scenario in relation to an environment. The setting can present the character before he has appeared.
	Example	Objects in a scene may indicate a character's social position, tastes, habits, lifestyle, and personality.
Semantic function		This function works on a level of denotation and connotation with the metaphorical, metonymical and synecdochial capacity of the scenic assembly.
	Example	Milk is known as a symbol of purity. If a bottle of milk is broken, we can infer that purity has been corrupted.
Synesthetic function		This function seeks to reach our perceptions, working our visual, verbal, chromatic, olfactory and musical repertoires, among others, to cause emotion and commotion.
	Example	Which sensation would a bottle of milk evoke if placed in the context of a cold European climate and an operatic soundtrack? How is this same bottle interpreted when placed in the setting of a sunny day with an *allegro* of sweet flute as a soundtrack?
Referential function		This function refers to other arts, languages, and contexts that are separate from a film but are referenced in this film.
	Example	All the films that make reference specifically to Hitchcock's shower scene in *Psycho*.
Dialogical function		This function intends to re-contextualize a given reference.
	Example	The Brazilian film *Central Station* (Walter Salles, 1998) shows the character Dora, who judges and decides the destiny of letters: garbage, drawer or post. Within the religious environment of the film, garbage, drawer and post clearly correspond to hell, purgatory and heaven.
Ideological function		This function contemplates objects which are able to express ideological concepts in film.

	Example	Explicit *propaganda* films, such as the Soviet film *October* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927) and the German film *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1934).
Authorial function	This function refers to the relevance of the interference of the author's own personal data in films and also to his/her appearance on screen.	
	Example	Hitchcock's appearances in his films.
Aesthetic function	This function refers to the design of objects, as well as to the aesthetic movement in which they are inserted.	
	Example	The design used in Wim Wenders' films from the 1970s and 1980s is a reflex of German modernism and functionalism.
Advertising function	This function refers to product placement, which occurs via the inclusion of a brand's logo in a shot, or a favorable mention or appearance of a product in a shot.	
	Example	The James Bond film, *The Man with the Golden Gun* (Guy Hamilton, 1974), featured extensive use of AMC cars.

This methodological construction should not be understood as a naive proposal of statistics or measurement of criteria and functions. The challenge here is the development of a specific terminology and typology to examine visually represented objects. Thus, such criteria could still be enlarged and adapted.

The End

Objects are polysemic. The communication process emerges from daily life (temporal and repetitive, therefore also polysemic); it is a multiplicity of senses, a plurality of connotations, through which ordinary material objects can transform into signs. *Desires are polymorphous*. Human desire, as a conscious (or unconscious) expectation to possess something, can be expressed in several forms. The goal of a particular desire, or urge, may be a person but also a partial, real, or delusional object. Such desire breaks the limits and the firmness of our needs or biological instincts. The possibility of choice in the election of a desired object – amid the diversity of shapes and susceptible senses to awake a desire, an aspiration – helps us to see the identity of who makes the choice.

Thus, the filmic performance can work as a stage, as a favorable atmosphere to allow for the expression of human urges.

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Notes

1. The first step toward the development of a methodology for film analysis by focusing on objects was started in 2004 at Kassel University, Germany, in association with Dr. Simone Malaguti. See Gambarato and Malaguti, 2006 and 2008.
2. We can mention as explicit *propaganda* films, which repeatedly advocate a partisan point of view, the Soviet film *October* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1927) and the German film, *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1934).