

Beyond Representation: Cinema, History, and Forms of Knowledge in Paul Willemen

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This article examines the epistemological implications of Paul Willemen's theory of cinema. Against approaches that understand film primarily as a system of representation, Willemen argues that cinema is a historically situated cultural practice in which history presents itself through the material and formal organization of filmic texts. His concepts of indexicality, configurative pressures, and fantasy show how filmic forms are materially connected to the socio-historical conditions of their production. Particular attention is given to Willemen's reinterpretation of Peirce's semiotics and his claim that the indexical dimension of cinematic signs establishes an ontological relation between representation and history. The article argues that cinema produces a non-propositional form of historical knowledge grounded in perception and experience, thereby opening the possibility of conceiving cinema as a symbolic form. From this perspective, cinema is conceived as a site where historical forces, forms of experience, and modalities of knowledge converge.

Keywords: cinema – indexicality – historical knowledge – fantasy – representation – symbolic form

Introduction

Within the field of film studies, the work of Paul Willemen (1944 – 2012) occupies a distinctive place. His proposal places cinema as a historically situated cultural practice. For Willemen, cinema involves a constellation of practices encompassing production, circulation, exhibition, reception, and criticism, all of which are embedded in specific socio-economic configurations.

From this perspective, cinema configures modes of experience, subjectivity, and knowledge. In “Fantasy in Action,” Willemen (2009) formulates two questions that go beyond the field of film studies and address the broader problem of the relationship between history, experience, and representation: “how precisely the forces that shape history also and simultaneously shape ways of knowing, fantasizing, and storytelling...how do the dynamics animating historical change ‘present’ in representations?” (Willemen 2009, 252). Rather than conceiving history as an “external content” that cinema reproduces or “distorts,” Willemen proposes that history “presents” itself – in the way an illness is not directly seen but manifests through symptoms – within representations; that is, it becomes inscribed in their procedures, in their modes of address, in their technologies, and in their forms of sensible organization.

Willemen’s theoretical proposal articulates the distinction between representation and presentation while relating indexicality to the configurative pressures exerted by a given social formation. From this perspective, fantasy emerges not as a realm of mere imaginary content but as a mediating structure through which historical forces become available to sensible experience. In this respect, Willemen’s account of cinema offers valuable resources for conceiving art as a symbolic form, understood in the broad sense developed by Cassirer:

We can interpret the concept of the symbolic such that it is understood as a very determined *direction* of spiritual apprehension and configuration... It is a question of taking symbolic expression, that is, the expression of something “spiritual” through sensory “signs” and “images”.... By “symbolic form,” one should understand every energy of spirit by which the content of spiritual signification is linked to a concrete and intrinsically appropriate sensuous sign. In this sense, [art] confront us as particular symbolic form (Cassirer 2013, 75 – 76).

According to the author, art is constituted through its own sensuous signs and gives rise to a distinctive mode of experience. Drawing on Willemen’s theory, I argue that cinema generates a form of historical knowledge that is inseparable from the aesthetic experience mediated by its signs. Such knowledge is neither

propositional nor purely conceptual, nor can it be reduced to the formulation of theses about the past. Rather, it is an indexical, affective, and material form of knowledge.

I. Representation and Presentation: Toward a Non-Substitutive Theory of the Sign

During the 1970s, film semiotic theory consolidated a strongly structural model of cinematic representation. In key texts by Christian Metz (1974), Jean-Louis Baudry (1974 – 1975), and Stephen Heath (1981), cinema was conceived primarily as a system of signification analogous to language, organized around relations between signifiers and signifieds and articulated through positions of enunciation that produced subject effects. Even when references to Peirce were introduced – as in the case of Peter Wollen (2013) – the dominant concern was to classify and describe the functions of the sign within a relatively autonomous textual structure. Within this structural-semiotic paradigm, cinema was understood above all as a system of representation in which a set of formally organized signifiers stood “in place of” a world to which they referred. In this model, the central problem was to decipher how the text produced meaning, how it encoded reality, and how it positioned the spectator within an ideological structure. Representation was thus understood, in general terms, as a relation of substitution: one thing – the image, the shot, the sequence – occupied the place of another – an object, an event, a historical situation – within a regime of signification.

Willemsen questions the assumption that cinema can be primarily understood as a closed system of representation. His proposal reconfigures semiotics in order to analyze how the text organizes signifiers and produces effects of meaning, as well as how the historical forces that structure a social formation operate in and through filmic forms. In order to move beyond this closed understanding of the relation between cinematic signs inherited from semiotics, Willemsen proposes a structural analogy between texts and social formations:

Given that texts, just like social formations themselves, present an orchestration of a wide array of social agencies – interest positions arranged in preferred hierarchical relations of power – it follows that the very same forces that are said to animate and drive history will also constitute the configurative pressures that preside over text-formulations, that is to say, over the formation and shaping of objects such as films (Willemsen 2009, 251).

From the author's perspective, the formation of texts and social formations involves the convergence of multiple agencies – financial capital, the state, cultural elites, among others – whose positions are embedded in relations of production and historically situated configurations of power. These do not operate as homogeneous totalities, but as conflictual “orchestrations” that find expression in texts. Consequently, the film organizes and hierarchizes these relations, privileging certain positions and naturalizing specific forms of power within its own form.

For Willemen, historical forces operate in the formation of texts through “configurative pressures,” that is, structural pressures that orient forms of expression, making certain types of textual organization more likely than others. In the case of cinema, it is the available technologies within a given society at a particular stage of development, the organization of labor, models of production, regimes of subjectivity, and social hierarchies that exert pressure on how each individual film organizes the gaze, time, and modes of addressing the spectator. But how are these configurative pressures expressed in film form?

To address this question, Willemen draws on Peirce's semiotics and on Metz's reading of Louis Hjelmslev's (1971) linguistic distinctions. Before Peter Wollen systematically introduced Peircean semiotics into film studies with *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, the reception of Peirce within the cinematic field generally tended to simplify his theory into a typology of three clearly separated classes of signs: icon, index, and symbol. This classificatory reading – supported by schematic formulations of Peirce's own work and consolidated by general semiotic manuals such as those of Charles Morris (1985) – encouraged the view that each image could be predominantly assigned to one of these types.

In order to analyze the interpenetration of historical forces in film form, Willemen first revisits Peirce's theory, according to which there are not three mutually exclusive classes of signs, but rather three co-present dimensions within any given sign, albeit in varying hierarchies of prominence. Instead of asking what “type of sign” a cinematic image is, Willemen proposes to examine how the iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions operate simultaneously in the configuration of the text, and, in particular, how the indexical dimension makes it possible to think the material inscription of historical forces in film form itself.

We have to begin by abandoning the prevailing misreading of Peirce's work which alleges that he identified three different types of sign: the index, the icon, and the symbol. Instead, we have to understand Peirce as talking about

the three dimensions present in any given sign (but present in differing hierarchies of prominence). Then the door opens towards a type of textual analysis that can treat signs as partly representational (through their iconic and symbolic dimensions) and partly non-representational (in their indexical dimension). *The latter does not involve a substitutive relation, but one of expressive contiguity, profiling an ontological connection between sign and referent* (Willemen 2009, 256; emphasis added).

The key to Willemen's interpretation of the index lies in the notion of "expressive contiguity" and in the ontological connection between sign and referent. This interpretation constitutes a further step that makes it possible to analyze how history is embedded in signs through an expansion of the Peircean notion of indexicality. In *Elements of Logic* (1932), Peirce defines the index as a sign that refers to its object by virtue of being actually affected by it. In the case of photography, although resemblance is present, it derives from a physically enforced correspondence with reality. Thus, the index represents by virtue of a causal or referential connection with the object, its core being secondness – that is, the facticity of the world.

For a long time, cinematic specificity has been grounded in its indexical character, following Peirce's classification, or in its quality as a "trace" of the real, as articulated in the ontological-phenomenological reading inaugurated by André Bazin (1967) in the early 1960s. This discussion has gained renewed relevance in recent decades precisely due to the incorporation of digital technologies in film production.¹ However, Philip Rosen's (2001) reading of Bazin and Peirce – which Willemen takes up – makes it possible to reconsider the question of the trace and the index in cinema.

In Rosen's reading, for Peirce spatial resemblance – perspective, composition, visual codes – does not necessarily depend on indexicality, since an image may resemble its referent without guaranteeing indexical credibility:

But if the peculiarity of photographic and film is that they are indexical, what must be remembered is that codes or perceptual cues for spatial likeness do not in themselves constitute that evidence for the existence of the referent, which is definitive of indexical credibility (Rosen 2001, 19).

Rosen's key concept, indexical credibility, allows indexicality to be understood not merely as a causal relation, but as a set of markers indicating a productive relation with a referent; that is, indexical credibility is not perceptual but

¹ See Rodowick (2007), Doane (2006), and Esqueda (2019).

inferential. For Rosen, photography and cinema do not simply indicate that something existed, but that what is represented existed prior to the act of reading the sign. The point, therefore, is not that the image represents a historical past, but that the signifier itself – that is, the image as a material object – originates in the past.

Unlike traditional accounts that equate indexicality with immediate presence, Rosen conceives indexical credibility as a temporal structure in which the presence of the referent must be reconstructed by the spectator. In this sense, indexicality is inseparable from a cognitive operation, and indexical credibility depends on “the subject’s prior knowledge of how any such images are produced” (Rosen 2001, 21). From this perspective, indexicality cannot be reduced to a property of the photochemical support. Consequently, for Rosen, the production of digital cinema does not eliminate indexicality; rather, it persists even as the material support changes, since it fundamentally involves a temporal structure (“pastness”), evidence of production, and credibility inferred by the spectator.²

In Willemen’s account, signs are partly representational and partly non-representational, which means that the index does not substitute for the referent nor symbolically replace it; rather, there is an “expressive contiguity,” that is, a material proximity between sign and referent (Willemen 2009, 256). This implies that at some level – causal, physical, temporal, or bodily – the sign “touches” the referent; yet the sign does not describe the referent, but expresses it. From this perspective, the index expresses a relation to the real, not a meaning. Thus, when Willemen speaks of an ontological connection between sign and referent, he emphasizes that the index is not merely a semiotic effect, but a relation of being, a material or causal co-presence.

In this way, Willemen takes Rosen’s expanded notion of indexicality a step further. For him, in cinema there is not only an ontological connection between the image and what was once present – the bodies that were there, the light, the temporal structure (pastness) – but also a connection to the organization of

² Rosen argues that even in digital systems such as satellite surveillance, information still depends on real events: although the digital image may appear as “pure data,” such data has informational value only insofar as it refers to preexisting real entities. To account for this phenomenon, he proposes the notion of “digital indexicality,” referring to the fact that, even in the digital age, certain processes continue to depend on the capture of data from the world. Moreover, he notes that a digital camera gathers light like a traditional camera and can fulfill indexical functions such as photojournalism or family testimony. Thus, digitalization does not necessarily eliminate indexicality; it can incorporate it (see Rosen 2001, 307ff.).

labor, technologies, and material infrastructures. In this context, “expressive contiguity” helps clarify the claim that “it is at the indexical level that history ‘presents’ in representation”: from this perspective, history does not need to be thematized or turned into narrative, since it is materially inscribed in the sign itself. Thus, for Willemen (2009, 260) history presents itself as trace, symptom, and expressive inscription. The analytical power of this idea becomes clearer when combined with Hjeltmlev’s distinctions between substance and form of expression and substance and form of content.

II. Indexicality and Configurative Pressures

Metz’s reading of Hjeltmlev’s linguistic distinctions allows Willemen to show with great precision where and how historical forces present themselves in filmic texts. Willemen focuses on the articulation between the substance of expression (photographic image, recorded sound, filmed bodies) and the form of expression (editing, framing, camera movements), as well as the substance of content (narrative motifs, cultural codes, genres) and the form of content (narrative structure, oppositions, hierarchies of meaning).

For Willemen, the substance of expression is the privileged site where historical indexicality presents itself, since technology, the organization and division of labor, invested capital, and all the technical apparatuses involved in filmmaking make history appear as a material trace. The type of camera, lighting, and sound used in each film express historical contiguity. By contrast, the form of expression is where the mode of address, the perceptual organization of the spectator, and regimes of subjectivation are concentrated; in other words, it is where the direction of the spectator’s attention is regulated.

Willemen draws on Barthes’s (1975) notion of cultural codes to explain the substance of content, which encompasses genre, myth, ideology, and, more broadly, social imaginaries understood as historically constituted reservoirs of meaning. It is at this level that social fantasies are housed and subsequently organized through the form of content. Here, hierarchies, oppositions, narrative trajectories, and vectors of meaning are structured. Through the form of content, certain social positions are privileged, the field of social forces is ordered, and a preferred regime of social reproduction is constructed.

Following the interpretation of Peirce according to which there are not three mutually exclusive classes of signs, but rather three co-present dimensions within any given sign, Willemen (2009, 256) argues that the iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions traverse all levels of the text, although they tend to be organized differently at each level. While the substance of expression

is where the strongest anchoring of the indexical dimension occurs – since it is there that history presents itself as a trace within expressive substance – in the form of expression indexicality does not disappear, but becomes subordinated to iconicity. Likewise, within the substance of content, the symbolic dimension is evident – through the use of narrative codes or cinematic genres – as is the iconic dimension – through social analogies such as the family or the nation – yet the indexical dimension is also present, insofar as it is expressed in the historical contiguity between narrative codes and real social relations. Finally, in the form of content, symbolic organization responds to indexical historical pressures: in the case, for instance, of the mythology of the hero, the underlying indexical dimension would be the imaginaries of corporate and state power, as in *The Matrix* (Wachowskis, 1999), according to Willemen (2009; cf. Willemen 2004 and 2013). Thus, for Willemen, indexicality is not confined to the substance of expression; it can also manifest in the iconic, the symbolic, and the form of content, so that history presents itself without being explicitly named or thematized – rather, social forces are translated and made present in the filmic experience.

These ideas are developed in greater detail in “Indexicality, Fantasy and the Digital,” where the author argues:

In other words, while a text’s substance of content may “index” one or more ideological configurations or construals of the world, the pressure of the real striates its substance of expression with vertical integrators indexing or anchoring the text’s relation to an actual moment in the “history” of a social formation. These vertical integrators do not appear in the form of specific, discrete signifiers identifiable in the text: they indicate the tendency that signs have of “rooting” themselves in their social-historical ground by virtue of their indexical aspect. This indexical rooting tendency may be said to constitute their “vertical” dimension in addition to their, as it were, horizontal integration into and positional definition within the system of differences that constitute “a language.” What is made manifest through this indexical dimension is then organised by way of “collective representations” or ideologies through which our experience of everyday life is ordered into paradigms of making sense: the ideational paradigms that provide texts with their substance of content out of which specific textual meaning-shapes are formed (Willemen 2013, 120).

At the level of the substance of content – where collective representations and cultural configurations are located – ideologies are “indexed” through, for example, a neoliberal narrative, a meritocratic fantasy, or a traditional family

melodrama. In other words, the formation of a filmic text necessarily draws on culturally organized forms of meaning-making, from which its content is subsequently shaped. The themes developed are not “historical” in the sense that they represent historical events, but in that they express contiguity with a specific historical moment.

By contrast, at the level of the substance of expression, history does not present itself as ideology, but as material pressure through what Willemen calls vertical integrators – that is, structural tendencies or forces that “traverse” the text. It is in this verticality that the indexical dimension is expressed, since, in Willemen’s view, the sign not only signifies but also becomes “rooted” in a historical moment by being materially anchored in a mode of production. In classical semiotics, signification operates horizontally: the sign signifies through difference and occupies a position within a language, integrated into a system. The introduction of the indexical dimension adds a vertical dimension, in which the sign no longer functions through substitution but through ontological contiguity: film images are produced with specific technologies, under particular labor conditions, and within a given moment of capitalism. The substance of expression thus accounts for the material inscription of images. This “rooting tendency” of signs leaves traces, sets limits, and exerts pressures on the configuration of images. In sum, history is not only represented in content; it is vertically inscribed in expression. This inscription does not appear as an identifiable sign but operates as a structural pressure.

III. Fantasy and Modalities of Knowledge

A final aspect that follows from Willemen’s thesis – that it is through the indexical dimension of the substance of expression that filmic texts are linked to historical dynamics – and which I would like to highlight, concerns cinema as a producer of social fantasies. Willemen draws on Freud’s (2013) analysis of how dream-work transforms latent thoughts into manifest content through various processes of distortion, such that dreams do not directly display unconscious desires, but rather deform them. This theoretical move allows Willemen to distance himself, at another level, from the classical Marxist interpretation according to which cinema would function as a “reflection” of the economic superstructure. As the author states:

One of the consequences of adopting that hypothesis is that it becomes possible to differentiate between, at least, two distinct, though related, levels in texts where fantasy processes are at work. At the level of the substance of content, a menu of culturally determined fantasy scenarios – ideological

paradigms of a sort – exert pressure on the way networks of ideas are knitted together into secondarily elaborated ideological or philosophical frameworks or semantic fields underpinning the orchestration of a particular “form”: the particular version of the fantasy performed by/in the text (such as a particular version of “the Oedipus” – a substance of content – performed in and by a given film). At the level of a text’s substance of expression, it is the way the physico-sensoral aspects of cinematic signification are transformed into menus of expressive procedures. For instance, the recourse to special effects emphasizing iconicity over indexicality or expanding the range of possible actorial gestuality by means of stunt doubles or suspending actors on wires, using digital editing and amplified soundtracks, and so forth: these constitute a substance of expression that, by virtue of its very selective aspect, vehiculates another kind of fantasy scenario (Willemen 2009, 264 – 265).

Following the Freudian line of argument, for Willemen, fantasy functions as a means of translating social pressures into sensible forms, a mode of mediation between historical forces and experience that operates prior to and beyond explicit ideology. At the level of the substance of content, there exists a “menu of culturally determined fantasy scenarios” – that is, socially and historically determined imaginative possibilities from which narratives are constructed. Because this menu is historically limited and structured, it exerts pressure on the organization of meaning, shaping how ideas are arranged, semantic fields are structured, and possible interpretations are oriented. These primary fantasies – in the Freudian sense – are then secondarily elaborated, so that each individual film presents a specific version of fantasy, historically situated and adapted to a particular discursive regime.

The second level is more radical: fantasy also presents itself in the substance of expression, that is, in the sensory procedures of cinema, in a non-narrative, technical-sensory mode. At this level, fantasy does not articulate ideas nor is it narrated; rather, it is experienced by the spectator as excitation, immersion, control, excess, and so forth. Willemen’s key example here is special effects, which function as “menus of expressive procedures” inextricably tied to industry, capital, technology, and the organization of labor. What is at stake is a fantasy of what the system can do – of its power and its control over bodies and matter.

These two levels of fantasy may either align or diverge. They are aligned when narrative and expressive fantasy push in the same direction, allowing the film to naturalize a particular regime of power. They are misaligned when the narrative appears to critique power while the expressive dimension celebrates it.

This distinction enables Willemen to explain how cinema can be ideologically “critical” yet politically conservative at the same time, and to read history in sensory form, not only at the level of content. It also allows cinema to be understood as a practice of subject formation rather than merely a discourse. In sum, from this perspective, history is presented in expressive fantasy and represented in content-based fantasy. An extreme case of this theoretical framework is what Willemen terms “corporate dreaming”:

But in addition to narratorial discourses of self-congratulation and corporate power, the signifiers of spectacular digitisation also carry a third discursive thread: corporate dreaming. It is as if the financial powers underpinning those effects are insinuating, through the indexical dimensions encrusted into the very technological resources deployed (and what we know such a deployment must imply), a set of modalities of knowing and experiencing which convey a power-fantasy (as distinct from the display of actual financial clout) that betrays something of the way in which these social-economic sectors would like to organise the world and “us,” the recipients of those fantasies, into an endlessly malleable mass to be transformed, at speeds unencumbered by industrial technology, and centrally controlled by programmers of electronic flows. Corporate dreams, however, are to be read in a kind of echo chamber constituted by the reverberations between indexical features of the substance and form of expression (the menu of technical resources deployed) and the indexical dimension of the substance and form of content (the selections made from what Barthes called codes of knowledge or cultural codes operating at the level of the substance of content) (Willemen 2013, 129).

The “corporate dreaming” expressed in many digital science fiction films is not explicit ideology, but structural imagination. It does not openly celebrate the “virtues” of capitalism; rather, it stages a modality of power and turns it into a form of sensible experience. In other words, spectacular digital cinema imaginatively rehearses how financial capital would like to organize the world. This fantasy is not conveyed solely at a symbolic level, but also indexically through digital effects, as previously discussed. In this sense, digital spectacle functions indexically as a trace of financial organization, technological concentration, and a regime of control.

Thus, the fantasies presented in many science fiction films made with digital technologies produce a way of experiencing the world as fully manipulable, as a frictionless space in which bodies and matter are malleable and flows are centrally controlled. In stronger terms, from Willemen’s perspective, cinema –

particularly spectacular digital cinema – produces a form of practical, sensory, affective, imaginative, and historical-material knowledge, insofar as it enables us to experience what it feels like to live under specific configurations of power, to accept certain modalities of control, and to naturalize particular social relations. This type of cinema does not simply imagine future worlds; it produces a form of sensibility aligned with contemporary financial capital: it does not merely produce images; it produces subjects. And, therefore, it produces historical knowledge in the form of perceptual training, affective modeling, and habituation to specific regimes of power.

Conclusions

As shown throughout this article, Willemen's theoretical proposal extends beyond the field of film theory. From his perspective, cinema constitutes a mode through which history presents itself in experience, and a site where historical dynamics are materially inscribed in the very form of the filmic text.

His distinction between representation and presentation also raises an epistemological problem that exceeds semiotics. If cinematic knowledge cannot be reduced to representational adequacy, then cinema may be understood as a mediated form of access to historical processes, grounded in the material traces that make film production possible as well as in the modes of attention, perception, and subjectivity that films organize. In this sense, cinema emerges as a cultural form through which societies objectify and organize historically specific modes of experience while generating a non-propositional form of knowledge.

Another epistemological conclusion that can be drawn from his theoretical approach is that cinema organizes the perceptual, affective, and imaginative capacities through which historical reality becomes available to experience. In Willemen's account of fantasy, cinematic knowledge is mediated through structures of power, social imaginaries, and the sensory and affective forms by which historical reality is apprehended. From this perspective, fantasy should be conceived as a cognitive mediation through which historical forces become experientially accessible, rather than as mere imaginary content.

Finally, Luft claims that symbolic forms are "parallel functional series with their *own* right and their *own* way of functioning, serving their *own* cognitive function" (2005, 9, emphasis in the original), while Cassirer argues that "the image has ceased to be something simply received from the outside; it has become something formed from the inside in which a fundamental principle

of free forming prevails” (Cassirer 2013, 78). In this sense, Willemen’s reflections on cinema contribute to understanding cinema as a symbolic formation by identifying a specifically cinematic mode of historical knowledge grounded in experience, perception, and fantasy.

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