

Visual Discourse Strategies: A Semiotic-Cognitive Approach to the 'Unseen' Structure in *Rear Window* (1954)

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Received : 08/10/2025 ; Accepted : 15/11/2025 ; Published : 20/12/2025

Abstract

This research investigates the formative mechanisms of cinematic discourse through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates structural semiology, phenomenology, and the psychology of visual perception. It transcends the aesthetic description of the image to analyze its transformation from a "technical datum" into a rigorous "semiotic system." Drawing upon Christian Metz's semiotic legacy and the concept of the "Imaginary Signifier," the research engages with David Bordwell's "Poetics of Cinema" and Roland Barthes' reflections on the emotional impact of the image (*Punctum*). The study concludes that cinematic reception is not a passive process, but a complex cognitive-perceptual interaction wherein the spectator reconstructs meaning based on "contextual visual words" within the filmic structure. **Keywords:** Cinematic Semiology, Imaginary Signifier, Poetics of Perception, Film Analysis, Filmic Ontology.

Introduction

In contemporary scholarship, cinema is no longer merely a medium for exhibition or a narrative tool; it has become an "epistemological laboratory" for the sign and a cognitive framework that encapsulates human perceptual mechanisms. The transition from the film as a physical object (*filmic object*) to cinema as a discursive system (*cinematic discourse*) necessitates that the performing arts scholar deconstruct the "semantic production mechanisms" that transcend the frame. The research problematic centers on a fundamental question: How is cinematic meaning situated at the intersection of rigorous semiotic systems and the flexible perceptual processes of the spectator? Can the mechanisms of the "Imaginary Signifier" explain our perception of cinematic virtual reality as a parallel truth?

Research Problematic: The research problem branches into procedural questions: To what extent does cinematic discourse achieve its semantic functions in the absence of a *langue* (in the traditional linguistic sense, per Christian Metz)? Furthermore, how do modern perceptual theories contribute to explaining the "stability of meaning" despite multiple levels of visual interpretation?

Research Hypotheses:

1. Cinema organizes discourse within a "system of contextual signs" processed mentally as a natural language, reinforcing the hypothesis of a universal cinematic language.
2. The spectator's "psychological identification" emerges from the image's ability to bridge the gap between external reality and the imagined self, transforming the film into a holistic perceptual-psychological experience.

Methodology: The study adopts a structural-semiotic approach as its primary framework, employing phenomenological analysis to examine the viewing experience. It further utilizes a comparative method to link psychoanalytic film theory with cognitive studies on computational visual perception, providing a modern procedural character suited to contemporary transformations in the performing arts.

Conceptual Framework

To ensure scientific consistency and avoid semantic ambiguity, this study defines the following core concepts:

1. **Cinematic Discourse:** Defined here as the total system of visual and auditory messages organized according to rules of editing and direction; it is a complete linguistic structure operating under specific semantic systems. It transcends the "shot" to become a continuous flow that the spectator reconstructs mentally (Metz, 1974).
2. **Cinema Semiology:** The scientific study of the "life of signs" within the social life of the film. It analyzes how the cinematic "signifier" (shot, movement, lighting) acquires its "signified" in the spectator's mind. We rely on Christian Metz (1971), who asserts that cinema creates a self-contained semiotic system that reconstructs reality rather than merely mimicking it.
3. **Visual Perception:** The complex mental process of transforming light reflected from the screen into coherent meanings. We move beyond traditional physiological definitions to adopt the cognitive approach, linking "attentional guidance" with scene processing, where the

spectator actively engages in "scene categorization" based on contextual visual words (Henderson, 2013).

I. Cinema as Language: The Semiotic Approach

The transition toward semiology in film studies marked a pivotal moment, shifting analysis from aesthetic impressionism to scientific rigor. In this context, Christian Metz¹ stands out as the primary theorist who sought to apply Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic concepts to filmic material. Metz argues that although cinema is a visual art, it functions as a "language," yet it lacks a *langue*² in the strict sense—that is, it does not possess a system of fixed rules preceding usage as natural languages do (Metz, 1974).

1. The Problem of Semantic Units: Metz posits that the semiotic power of cinema lies not in the existence of "phonemes" (units equivalent to letters), but in the adoption of the "shot" as the smallest major semantic unit capable of carrying meaning. This shift moved film analysis away from simple narrative critique toward the "deconstruction of systems of signification" that organize the flow of shots (Metz, 1971). The narrative and logical arrangement of shots creates what Metz termed "cinematic discourse," where the shot acquires its meaning through its relationship to adjacent shots (relations of succession and alternation).

2. Structural Analysis of Film: According to the Metzian perspective, film analysis does not merely seek to understand what is visible on the screen but strives to uncover the rules that render this visibility intelligible. In his seminal work, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Metz illustrates that cinema is a "composite art" that integrates image, movement, and time, rendering the semiology of cinema more complex than that of the static image (Wollen, 2013). Consequently, the performing arts scholar's task is to interrogate the "hidden structures" that render a series of moving photographs a coherent and persuasive "discourse" for the spectator³.

3. Cinema as a Semiotic System: For Metz, semiology does not signify the creation of a dictionary of image meanings, but rather the study of "cinematic semiosis"—the process by which the visual is transformed into a mental "concept." This foundation opened cinema to psychoanalytic and sociological analysis, where film analysis serves as a tool for exposing the relationship between the "cinematic signifier" (the shot) and the "cultural signified" (the ideological or emotional meaning). In this regard, Colin Williams' review (2001) suggests that Metz's contribution redefined cinema not as a consumer product, but as an *apparatus* that reformulates the spectator's consciousness of reality⁴.

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V. Image Semiology and Psychoanalysis (The "Imaginary Signifier")

Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (1986) represents an epistemological turning point in film studies⁵, shifting analysis from linguistic structuralism to the realm of psychoanalysis. Metz argues that the affective power of cinema lies in its unique nature, which relies on the "presence of absence"; the spectator realizes that what they see on screen is not a tangible physical reality, but an "imaginary version" (Metz, 1986).

1. Identification and Voyeurism: In this section, we emphasize that academic film analysis does not merely stop at the technical description of the shot or montage, but delves into what Metz termed "the investigator's imaginary" (Metz, 1975). The cinematic spectator enters a state of "identification" with the camera, becoming the observer of reality⁶. Dissecting these psychological mechanisms allows us to understand how the viewer transitions from a passive recipient to an active partner in the film's "semiosis."

VI. Toward a "Cognitive Poetics" Methodology (Bordwell and Williams)

Moving beyond ideological or psychological readings, David Bordwell (2012) introduces the "Poetics of Cinema" model as a methodological tool for analyzing the "stealth poetics"⁷ that dictate specific perceptual paths for the recipient. Bordwell posits that a film is a precisely organized "cognitive structure," wherein the director utilizes montage, lighting, and composition to impose perceptual constraints that ensure the spectator's visual attention is guided (Bordwell, 2016).

1. Cognitive Integration: This vision aligns with Christopher Williams' (2001) reviews, which advocate for building a "film ontology" that bridges aesthetic form and semantic function. The approach focuses on the fact that cinema is not merely a "text" for translation, but a *process* that requires the spectator to perform complex mental inferences to link disparate visual elements—thereby proving that film analysis must fundamentally be a "cognitive analysis" (Williams, 2001).

VII. Visual Space and Scene Categorization (Computational Approach)

In the context of exploring new horizons for the performing arts, we rely on James Henderson's (2013) studies on "Computational Approaches to Reading and Scene Perception." These studies open the door to a precise scientific understanding of "contextual visual words" (Qin & Yung, 2010).

1. Temporal Invariance and Perception: Our perception of a cinematic scene does not rely on the chance of viewing, but on a precise "scene categorization" process, where the spectator's perceptual network maintains the "temporal invariance" of visual information even with rapid cuts or editing speeds (Qin & Yung, 2010). This link between "film analysis" and "cognitive sciences" provides the performing arts researcher with robust tools to explain how cinematic meaning stabilizes in the audience's mind despite the complexity of the visual structure⁸.

VIII. Applied Film Analysis: A Procedural Model for Deconstructing Scene Structure and Meaning

The transition from theoretical approach to procedural analysis is the most critical practice in performing arts studies. Here, we place the "scene" under the microscope of deconstruction, considering it the living cell in which the film's semiotic and aesthetic rules manifest.

1. Toward Scene Linguistics: Technical Cutting and Narrative Logic (Metzian Approach):

Christian Metz's (1974) approach transcends the artistic description of shots; it treats the film as a "discourse" composed of major semantic units (*syntagmas*). *Procedural Analysis:* When applying this method to cinematic "confrontation scenes," we do not merely observe angles, but monitor the "cinematic syntax" that connects the Long Shot to the Close-up. This progression represents a shift from "spatial volume" (defining the characters' relationship to the environment) to "psychological volume" (delving into psychological motivations). Here, montage becomes the "syntax" that organizes the flow of signs; the shot acquires its value not for itself, but for its position within the total narrative system (Metz, 1971).

2. Visual Phenomenology: The Dialectic of the Visible and the Veiled (Aumont's Approach):

Jacques Aumont (2017) elevates film analysis from the level of "vision" to that of "contemplation of visual material." His concept of the "veiled image" provides keys to understanding what lies beyond the surface. *Procedural Analysis:* In applying analysis to lighting and shadows, we move away from direct technical explanation to reach what Aumont calls "doublures du visible" (Aumont, 2021). The "formless"—the dark or blurred areas within the frame—is not a "void," but a semantic space loaded with "implicit meaning." The image here does not derive its expressive power from what it clearly displays, but from what it "veils" and leaves to the spectator's imagination; this is the essence of the "imaginary signifier" that links the vitality of the image to the mystery of existence⁹.

3. Cognitive Poetics and Scene Categorization: Attentional Guidance (Bordwell and Henderson):

The act of viewing goes beyond seeing; it extends to the "mental categorization" of visual information. *Procedural Analysis:* We rely here on "contextual visual words" (Qin & Yung,

2010). The researcher in performing arts monitors how the director uses "attentional guidance" tools to highlight a specific property within the frame—a detail that acts as a cognitive center of gravity. The spectator succeeds in building a semantic unit for the scene thanks to the "temporal invariance" of visual symbols; this allows the human mind to recognize the scene's visual identity despite changing shots and camera angles (Henderson, 2013). We are analyzing cinema here not as a story, but as "visual data processing" imposed by the film's structure on the spectator.

4. Semiotics of Affect: From Studium to Punctum (Roland Barthes): In in-depth film analysis, we move beyond the denotation of the scene to delve into layers of emotional meaning by applying the methodology of Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (2001). *Procedural Analysis:*

- **Studium:** The analytical level where we deconstruct "cultural meaning"; we observe the social, political, and historical elements appearing in the decor, costumes, or actors' gestures. It is the framework in which the spectator places the film within the context of general cultural knowledge.
- **Punctum:** The "critical semiotic moment"; we search for that unexpected detail—that visual "prick"—which does not serve the direct narrative context but breaks the monotony of viewing to create an aesthetic or existential shock (Barthes, 2001). The *Punctum* is what transforms the film from a "readable text" into a "living experience" that leaves an impact on the spectator's memory ¹⁰. Identifying these "pricks" in a cinematic scene is one of the highest tools of film analysis because it connects art directly to human existence.

Methodology for Sample Analysis

This study relies on the "Shot and Scene Unit" as a procedural anchor, subjecting key scenes to three overlapping levels of analysis:

1. **Semiotic-Technical Level:** Shot-by-shot analysis (Metz, 1974), focusing on syntax, angles, and montage (Metz, 1971).
2. **Cognitive-Visual Level:** Analysis of attentional guidance and contextual visual words (Bordwell, 2012; Henderson, 2013; Qin & Yung, 2010).
3. **Phenomenological Level:** Analysis of the *Punctum* and the dialectic of the visible/veiled (Barthes, 2001; Aumont, 2017).

II. Supplementary Axes (Enhancing Rigor and Comprehensiveness)

Axis IX: Aesthetics of the "Formless" in Contemporary Imagery (Aumont's Perspective) This axis examines the concept of "Indefinite Visions" according to Aumont (2017), where contemporary cinema transcends visual sharpness in favor of "visual fluidity"¹¹. The "blurred image" or the "Formless" is no longer considered a technical flaw but an aesthetic tool expressing existential crises and collective memory (genetic memory). This axis bridges the philosophy of the image with the indeterminate visual formations found in modern cinema.

Axis X: A Critical Review of Film Theories (Miller & Stam) Here, we review the critical shifts presented in Miller and Stam's (2003) *A Companion to Film Theory*. This axis discusses the transition from strict structuralism to post-structuralism¹², and how these shifts have reformulated the concepts of the "auteur" and the "filmic text" in light of the digital media revolution (Miller & Stam, 2003). This axis situates the film within its broader critical context.

Axis XI: Multimedia and Visual Learning (Mayer's Perspective) We conclude these axes by linking "cinema" with "visual learning" based on the work of Mayer (2005). This axis reviews how cinema functions as a cognitive tool (*Multimedia Learning*) that enhances the spectator's ability to process complex information¹³. The integration of auditory and visual channels in cinema does not merely serve the narrative but elevates the spectator's cognitive efficiency¹⁴.

Analytical Matrix

To elevate the standard of film analysis, we propose the inclusion of an analytical matrix for each sample scene. This matrix is designed to synthesize semiotic techniques (Metz) with cognitive processing (Henderson).

Shot	Technical Description	Semiotic Analysis (Metz)	Cognitive Impact (Henderson/Bordwell)
Shot (1)	Long Shot (LS) of the location	Establishing the "Imaginary Signifier" system of the space	Contextual processing (Scene Gist)

Shot	Technical Description	Semiotic Analysis (Metz)	Cognitive Impact (Henderson/Bordwell)
Shot (2)	Zoom-in	Emergence of a Barthesian <i>Punctum</i>	Attentional Guidance
Shot (3)	Close-up (CU) of the face	Identification with the psychological "Signifier"	Visual constancy and motion prediction

Table (1): Analytical model for the intersection of the semiotic sign and cognitive impact in a film scene.

Methodological Commentary on the Table

It is evident from the matrix above that the semiotic construction of a shot does not function in isolation from the spectator's cognitive processing. While the "Imaginary Signifier" (Metz) establishes consciousness of the space, the spectator's cognitive network (Henderson) simultaneously converts this signifier into immediate "contextual processing." The transition from "psychological identification" in the Close-up to "attentional guidance" in the zoom shot demonstrates that the filmmaker does not merely construct a visual narrative; rather, they engage in the "engineering of attention," ensuring the flow and stabilization of meaning within the spectator's memory. This synthesis of semiotic technique and cognitive impact is precisely what grants cinema its power as an art form that simultaneously engages both the eye and the mind (Metz, 1974; Henderson, 2013).

Applied Chapter: The Opening Scene and the Establishment of the "Voyeuristic Apparatus"

The opening sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) serves as the ideal laboratory for deconstructing the semiotic structure of cinematic discourse. Hitchcock does not merely offer a narrative prologue; he establishes a "visual contract" with the spectator, transforming them into a voyeur in the strictest Metzian sense.

1. Semiotic Analysis of the Opening Shots (Establishing the Imaginary Signifier)

In the first minutes, the curtain rises on the "courtyard," where the stacked apartments are transformed into "signs" within a precise semiotic system. *Analysis:* According to Metz (1974)¹⁵, we do not witness "reality," but an "imaginary signifier" that embodies the concept of voyeurism. The Long Shot (LS) that opens the film serves as a "major discursive unit" that sets the rules of the visual game: we see what the protagonist (Jeff) sees, thus becoming partners in the "syntax" of cinematic spectatorship.

2. The Dialectic of the Visible and the Veiled (Aumont's Perspective)

Here, the concept of the "veiled image" (Aumont, 2017) comes to the fore; every window in the courtyard is an "image in formation" (Indefinite Vision). *Analysis:* Hitchcock's use of shadows in adjacent rooms re-centers the "Formless." We do not see events clearly; we see flashes, shadows, and incomplete movements. These "doublings of the visible" (*doublures du visible*) empower the scene by stimulating the spectator's imagination to fill the semantic gaps¹⁶.

3. Procedural Analysis Matrix (Model No. 1 - Opening Scene)

Shot	Technical Description	Semiotic Analysis (Metz)	Cognitive Impact (Henderson/Bordwell)
Shot (1)	Long Shot (LS) of the courtyard	Establishing the "Imaginary Signifier" of the place as a theater of voyeurism	Contextual processing (Scene Gist) and determination of the visual field
Shot (2)	Zoom-in on a window	Emergence of a Barthesian <i>Punctum</i> : a detail of daily life	Attentional Guidance toward the window
Shot (3)	Close-up (CU) of the protagonist's face	Identification with the psychological "Signifier" (we see through his eyes)	Visual constancy and motion prediction within the frame

4. Visual Perception and Scene Categorization

This opening is analyzed through "contextual visual words" (Qin & Yung, 2010). The performing arts researcher observes how Hitchcock directs our attention (Attentional Guidance) via the camera's movement as it sequences from one window to another. This direction is not arbitrary but is a cognitive strategy ensuring that "temporal invariance" remains present in the spectator's mind¹⁷, leading them to categorize this visual chaos as a "crime scene" before the crime has even begun.

Applied Chapter II: The Scene of Suspicion (Constructing Cognitive Meaning)

In this scene, "cinematic discourse" ceases to be a mere exhibition of reality and transforms into a cognitive inferential process. Hitchcock here applies Bordwell's (2016) principle regarding "stealth poetics"; the protagonist (and the audience with him) does not see the crime clearly, but rather perceives "cues" that require immediate mental processing.

1. Semiology of "Scattered Cues"

At this moment, the shots become a "series of signifiers" whose signified remains incomplete. *Analysis:* We utilize Metz (1974) ¹⁸ to deconstruct spatial contiguity. Montage here serves as the "syntax" linking Thorwald (the neighbor) exiting at night with the large trunk. The connection between these shots exists not in the written text, but in the "spectator's mind." The scene becomes a "major semantic unit" requiring the viewer to perform "scene categorization" ¹⁹.

2. Cognitive Perception: Attentional Guidance

Henderson's role in understanding attentional guidance is prominent here ²⁰. *Analysis:* Hitchcock utilizes camera movement and "Rack Focus" to emphasize a specific property, such as the knife or the saw. This detail functions as a "contextual visual word." The spectator, by virtue of "temporal invariance" (Henderson, 2013), links this detail to its previous context (the mysterious neighbor's dialogue), creating a "state of cognitive tension" ²¹.

3. Procedural Analysis Matrix (Model No. 2 - Scene of Suspicion)

Shot	Technical Description	Semiotic Analysis (Metz)	Cognitive Impact (Henderson/Bordwell)
Shot (4)	Medium Shot (MS) of the neighbor	Emergence of the "indexical sign" (the trunk)	Activation of Visual Working Memory
Shot (5)	Rack Focus	<i>Semiosis</i> of the ambiguous action	Attentional Guidance toward the knife
Shot (6)	Close-up (CU) of protagonist's eye	Identification with the inferential "signifier"	Inferential processing and outcome prediction

4. From *Studium* to *Punctum* (Barthes' Perspective)

In this scene, we apply Barthes' ²² perspective with high precision. *Analysis:*

- **Studium:** Everything surrounding the neighbor, including dim lighting and clothing suggesting seriousness (the scene's denotative meaning).
- **Punctum:** The "prick" here may be the neighbor's suspicious movement while cleaning the knife or looking at the window at an unexpected moment. This detail breaks the "monotony of surveillance," creating an "aesthetic shock" that transforms the spectator from an observer into a "partner in the investigation"²³.

Critical Commentary: The "Leading Thread" (Cinematics as an Investigative Process)

If we view these three scenes—the establishing opening, the turn toward suspicion, and the climax—as junctions in cinematic discourse, we discover a "leading thread" that transcends narrative sequence. This thread is the "process of cognitive investigation" imposed by Hitchcock on the spectator. In the opening, we are in the stage of "semiotic establishment," where cognitive rhythm is calibrated. As we move to the suspicion scene, this map becomes a "field of signals," where the viewer begins to practice "inferential processing" based on contextual visual words. Finally, in the confrontation, this process reaches its phenomenological climax, where the boundary between the *Studium* (the general context of crime) and the *Punctum* (the existential "prick" forcing the viewer to confront) dissolves.

Thus, *Rear Window* is not merely a tale about a voyeur; it is "Investigative Cinematics," where montage, shot selection, and focus function as mental algorithms aimed at the "engineering of the spectator's consciousness."

Conclusion: Cinema as a Cognitive Structure and a Bridge Between Vision and Consciousness

This research, through the study of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, concludes that film analysis has evolved beyond impressionistic aesthetic reading into a "cognitive anatomy" of the visual mind. The study proved that cinematic discourse—viewed semiotically, cognitively, and phenomenologically—functions as an "epistemological apparatus" that reproduces reality within the spectator's consciousness.

The synthesis of Metz's "Imaginary Signifier," Bordwell's "Poetics of Perception," and Henderson's computational analysis has revealed that cinema is a language demanding active mental participation. We conclude that cinema is as much a "visual philosophy" as it is a technical art, and the contemporary scholar must integrate the rigor of cognitive science with the depth of philosophical reflection to deconstruct this complex fabric.

Recommendations:

1. **Adopt Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Integrate "Cognitive Studies" into traditional film analysis to move beyond impressionistic critique toward measurable, objective analysis.
2. **Curriculum Development:** Academic institutions should develop "Film Analysis" courses to include "Poetics of Perception" and "Semiology of the Sign," training researchers to understand cinema as a "data-driven system" rather than just a story.

3. **Implement the Applied Method:** Adopt the "Analytical Matrix" as a primary procedural tool for deconstructing both Arab and international cinema to ensure critical consistency.

Footnotes

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- ² Ibid., p. 52.
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- ¹⁰ ¹⁰ Barthes, R. (2001). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*. Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-08886-4_6
- ¹¹ Aumont, J. (2021). *En toute image... Doublures du visible*. Presses universitaires du Septentrion. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.septentrion.106195>
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