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## **Lee Soo Hyuk: The Story of Visual Grammar in Cinema**

What if the recurrence of the roles Lee Soo Hyuk played in films was due to a semiophoric reading of his face ? By definition, a semiophore is a sign bearer : something that carries meaning, even – and especially – when it is silent. This immediately raises the question : how can a face convey meaning and, above all, does it convey only one meaning?

A face often signals, embodies, signifies, and imposes an interpretation even before words are spoken. For some philosophers rooted in the phenomenological tradition, such as Levinas<sup>1</sup>, the face is even the first ethical injunction. When we meet someone we know, it is easy to recognize whether they are sad, tired, cheerful, *etc.*, even before they have informed us of their state. This means that the face has a language, made up of signs that can be directly interpreted by others or, in the case of cinema, directly interpreted by the viewer. But are these signs innate, acquired, or codified ? *A fortiori*, in an art form where one of the fundamental pillars is based on “acting”, understood in the sense of learning the codes of another fictional character in order to transpose them.

The film as a whole, and not just the individuality of the actor, “means”, that is, it produces a set of meanings through moving images and sounds<sup>2</sup>. If it means something, it is because it offers meanings<sup>3</sup> to viewers. These meanings are conveyed through what Émile Benveniste<sup>4</sup> called “enunciation”<sup>5</sup>. To understand what enunciation is, it is necessary to say that, in a literary narrative, words such as “I”, “here”, and “tomorrow” refer not to the actual author of the text but to the fictional character who narrates the story. When Aurélien, in Aragon's eponymous novel, says at the end of chapter 38, “Could I live without her now ?”, it is not Aragon – the real author – who utters these words, but Aurélien – the fictional character – who declares them.

However, for there to be discourse, a statement, there must be a speaker (the one who speaks) and a listener (the one who receives the statement). In the case of literature and cinema – and unlike political discourse – the listener is the reader (or viewer) who receives a statement from someone... who does not exist. If, to the initiated, enunciation in cinema is what allows a film, based on the inherent potentialities of this art form, to take shape and manifest itself, particularly through characters addressing the viewer directly, which is common in cinema burlesque, in the Marx Brothers' films, or even those from music hall<sup>6</sup>, could we not go further and postulate that the enunciation lies within the actor's face itself, and that Lee Soo Hyuk's

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<sup>1</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totalité et infini*, Paris, Livre de Poche, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Aumont, Jacques, Bergala, Alain, Marie, Michel et Vernet, Marc, « Chapitre 3. Le film signifie : cinéma et langage » dans *Esthétique du film 125 ans de théorie et de cinéma*, Paris, Armand Colin, coll. « Cinéma / Arts Visuels », 2021, p.137-202.

<sup>3</sup> The study of meaning is a science called “semiology,” pioneered by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

<sup>4</sup> A major French linguist of the 20th century.

<sup>5</sup> This nomenclature was, to the initiated, produced for literature.

<sup>6</sup> Aumont, Jacques, *op. cit.*

face – perhaps more than others – carries within its very structure the characteristics of filmic enunciation ?

The word “figure”, used here and often used as a synonym for face, is interesting : in fact, we regularly talk about “cinematic figures”. But then, why is Lee Soo Hyuk a cinematic figure ? The term “figure” is polysemic : a figure is first and foremost an effigy, materially produced, derived from the Latin *figo*, which means “to model”. The first interesting definition is that a figure is materially produced in the sense of modeling, that is, it is given the desired features of a model *a priori*. Furthermore, in *Gestalt theory*, there is a contrast between figure and ground: the figure is the object, while the ground is the substance. This means that it is never the idea, but the product. On the other hand, it always appears in front of the ground. The outline therefore belongs to the figure, because it is precisely on this outline that representations attach themselves. However, the figure of the actor is indeed in front of the background of the film, no doubt because it bears the contours of the latter. But then another problem arises : can the contours of the figure move or, like a model of Rodin's Thinker, are they condemned to the fixity of the effigy ?

If we look back at the history of art starting in the 18th century, an artist and academician named Charles Le Brun<sup>7</sup> studied what could be called the “centrality of the face”. He analyzed how passions are projected onto a face as if it were a screen. While 4K films were not the preserve of his time, painting was, on the other hand, prolific. The work of the painter at that time was precisely a reflection on passions that would enable him to resolve the problem of the representability of those same passions, so that the image – a still image – would make sense to the viewer.

However, cinema, like painting, is also a question of projection. First, because we “project a film”, but above all because we project our passions onto the actors in the film. But in order for us to project, a mechanism of recognition must be in place. And for recognition to occur, the actor and the viewer must speak the same language, in other words, use the same signs and codes. If the painter's problem was the legibility of the passions represented, we can postulate that the same problem applies to the director today. Namely : how can passions be shown so that the viewer can read them ?

But if there is a writing-reading task, it is because there is a signifier-signified task that must refer to the same concept. Just as the word “camera” must signify a real camera in its materiality and not a pedestal table (which is undoubtedly less practical for filming feature films), if the director wants to convey the mystery of his character, it would be a shame if the viewer who receives the image interpreted it as a comic scene. This means that there are codes to which the passions and emotions of actors respond. What's more, if there is a codified way of acting out sadness or anger, there is a way of conveying it through the face that goes beyond

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<sup>7</sup> All analysis of the semiophore through Charles Le Brun comes from Laurent Gerbier's reading in *La Fabrique des passions*. #5 Interview with Laurent Gerbier.  
[Online:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpuZT9m1Uhc&t=1359s>].

simple acting. If there were no “fixation” of meaning, no painting could have conveyed sadness, even if the person being portrayed looked sad.

There are meanings that are conveyed, and perhaps Lee Soo Hyuk's face is more inclined to convey certain codes than others : perhaps, then, his face precedes his character. His long, angular features, with their ascetic beauty, his expressive neutrality coupled with a physicality whose stature is conveyed by his height, call for *a priori* interpretation. If he is described as a prince, a “cold beauty”, and categorized in supernatural roles or characters where coldness, mystery, and aura are the norm<sup>8</sup>, it is perhaps not so much a desire for artistic direction or acting choices as it is a semiophoric reading of a face and body that automatically convey this interpretation.

The casting precedes the speech because his figure embodies the idea of time. His face calls for these roles : high, prominent cheekbones, a defined jawline, a long neck, and thin lips are aesthetic criteria that call for princely roles rather than those of a court jester. It is not a question of acting ability but of the message encoded (notably by aesthetic standards) by a face, an industry, and the representations of an era. What the industry sees is not a man, but a set of signifiers, of passions conveyed by the bone structure, which the viewer will be able to interpret according to semiophoric codes tacitly determined by the artistic era in question.

If, in Le Brun's time, this question of the representability of passions was essentially a question for courtiers, where interpreting the signs on another person's face was a matter of political relations, we can find the same issues in cinema. It is a hermeneutics of the face, where the issues of legibility and controllability of the face are above all issues *vis-à-vis* the other. It is a relationship between faces that constantly scrutinize and judge each other. Interpreting the other without any possibility of interpreting oneself. Reading the face without one's own being read allows one to gain the upper hand.

But this question of the legibility of facial signs without the possibility of interpreting one's own face is a comparison that can be made between the actor and the spectator. The actor in cinema has no choice but to have a face that is read, analyzed, and sometimes projected, by codes shared between him and the spectator. The problem is that the spectator's face shows nothing. There is an absolute impermeability in the readability of the spectator's face by the actor, which is structurally arranged : the actor is public and publicly projected, while the spectator is private.

The semiophoric face is therefore a surface on which signs are displayed and attached. In the 18th century, it was a form of education for artists, who learned how the face conveys signs of anger, sadness<sup>9</sup>, *etc.*, but today it is also a form of education for actors. However, while it is an education for those who perform, it is also an education for those who watch – the audience – since it is necessary to speak the same sign language in order to decipher the same meaning, the same expression, the same message on the face.

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<sup>8</sup> This can be seen in *Tomorrow*, *Queen Woo*, and *Scholar Who Walks the Night*.

<sup>9</sup> The analysis is based on Laurent Gerbier's comparison of Descartes and Le Brun.

Just as painters face the challenge of knowing which features to emphasize so that the face they paint is also recognizable to the viewer, actors and directors face the same challenge in live performance. This means that the legibility of the face is not only a skill of the actor, who must know how to accurately convey the desired emotion, but also a skill of the viewer, who must know how to read the right emotion. These are artistic and social codes – as at court. The difference is that we move from a duo (painter-viewer) to a trio : actor, director, viewer. And it is particularly in this triptych that Lee Soo Hyuk's problem is rooted, because in this intermediary between the subject-face that bears the sign (the actor) and the spectator who reads them, there is a third party who projects the semiophoric vision onto the face and anticipates the reading of the signs by the spectator.

This typology imposed on the face in pictorial art is also found in the art of pantomime : that's how we learn to act. However, there is one difference : acting does not only involve the face as a semiophore, but the whole body. Expressing passion on stage is not only done with facial features, unlike a painting, which does not move, whereas the body on stage and in the theater is in motion. This then leads to a repertoire of postures : it is an expressiveness that will dominate not only the actor's face but his entire body as a semiophore. While there are manuals that standardize theatrical practice in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, we still see it at work in certain artists from the very beginning of cinema, such as Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

This use of the entire body as a semiophore can be seen once again in Lee Soo Hyuk, who – no doubt already shaped by his early career in the fashion industry – has a way of moving, standing, and walking that corresponds to certain stereotypes, or tropes, of fictional characters that are universally known, read, and shared. His confident gait, direct gaze, and gestures correspond to the codes of the mysterious, even supernatural characters he has embodied. This is also evident in TikTok videos, which continually present him as the dark, mysterious, and irresistibly attractive archetype for an audience trained to read the signs of these tropes. Even his height contributes to this semiophoric reading: his tall stature is like a silent statement of gentle domination. Since power is often associated with height – particularly in terms of eye contact – it is undoubtedly more difficult to imagine Lee Soo Hyuk bowing down to someone's influence than dominating them with his stature.

This interpretation, which Lee Soo Hyuk does not act out but carries with him despite himself, may answer the question of why he is often perceived or categorized in the same roles. Simply because his face bears the codes commonly shared between actor, director, viewer, and artistic tropes. But this means that these signs depend on established codes ; they are references. But codes imply standards, and therefore variations.

In Le Brun's typology of traits, there is a distinction between passions that is no longer legible to today's viewer. The reading is, in fact, outdated. It is no longer obsolete simply because the viewer has lost the ability to read it, but also because it has been standardized to be read by the general public. However, the rigidity of the code and the weight of the standard are burdensome, and art continually needs to shake things up in order to continue creating and not just repeating itself. This is a recurring point of tension for Lee Soo Hyuk, who has repeatedly expressed his desire to break out of his acting repertoire, which, translated without the filter of

public persona and celebrity that impose restraint, means: "Get me out of the shackles of this archetypal role, damn it. I. Am. Not. A sexy vampire." But he is stuck in a repertoire of roles due to the semiophoric standard of his face.

What about the industry or the public who have fixed their gaze on these codes ? It's almost a tautological question. No doubt the features of his face themselves call for an *a priori* interpretation that people in the industry perceived as being more typical of certain roles. No doubt the public had the same interpretation, also influenced by that of the directors and casting directors. Anyway.

This semiophory of faces, these meaningful codes to which they respond even before the words are spoken or the plot unfolds, can also prove to be a fiasco if the face is not structurally suited to the interpretation: this is evidenced by the numerous criticisms made of historical films in which the actors cast were considered to have a "too contemporary" appearance : this was particularly the case with Lily-Rose Depp in *Mon Roi*. The face therefore plays a role before the actor, but the problem is confinement.

Perhaps Lee Soo Hyuk's recent change in behavior, as noted by some fans, is an attempt to change and renew the semiotic codes with which he is associated. He has said that he wants to try different roles. It would therefore come as no surprise if, in order to be categorized in other repertoires, he is deliberately "breaking" his image in order to break away from the role that has been pre-assigned to him. Perhaps his freer, more fluid, less controlled gestures signify a desire to break away from the standard Darcy-like posture in *Pride and Prejudice* in order to play a waiter. But to play a waiter (and any reference to Sartre would be purely coincidental), the audience must also see us as a waiter, otherwise the identification with the role will fail.

Perhaps the freer expressions on his face are a desire to break away from the semiophoric role that his face has been assigned despite himself, in order to free himself from the reading of signs, to be able not only to change his acting register, but also to become a subject again rather than a simple symbolic surface to be exploited.

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