Edward Branigan, **Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory**, Routledge, 2006, 424 pp, $25.95 (paperback).

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Is there a language of cinema? Is there a syntax of film? Since the era of Christian Metz, these questions have spawned some of the lengthiest and looniest explorations in film theory. Clearly reading the writing on the wall in the semiotic soiree of contemporary French intellectual life, Metz translated his cinephilia into the lingua franca of the times, namely, the theory and jargon of semiotics, fully immersing his study in a thorough reading of the now notorious linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and his linguistic pedigree—the work of Chomsky, Barthes, Eco, and a veritable alphabet soup of theoretical terms and propositions. Metz's essays, published in the leading haute couture journals of semiotic esoterica, in particular, *Communications*, raised as many questions—all with the air of science, as in "questions for further research"—as they offered answers, while, nonetheless, producing a body of work that came to dominate academic film studies for almost two decades (indeed, the quasi-scientific aura surrounding Metz's work and that of his disciples very likely helped legitimize, more or less, film studies as a growing academic field and galvanize the spread of semiotics into other academic fields). These early essays, later collected in Metz's book *Film Language*, read like strange catechisms of modern semiotics: Is film a language? No, Metz answers, rather surprisingly. Is film a language system? Yes … and no. Film acts like a language in certain respects, but remains unlike one in other respects. Metz then spent pages enumerating the ways in which film remains impossibly and interminably *unlike* language systems, qualifying some statements with indefatigable footnotes explaining how certain film techniques quite possibly represent systems that parallel linguistic functions, only then to dismiss such a prospect and to demonstrate his repudiation in detail. Leaping from one of Metz's lengthy footnotes back to his text, still reeling from the necromantic gymnastics of Metz's tongue-tied semantics, one is surprised to suddenly discover statements such as the following: "I am persuaded … that the "filmolinguistic" venture is entirely justified, and that it must by fully "linguistic"—that is to say, solidly based on linguistics itself." This total commitment to the film-language analogy led Metz to create a painstaking system replicating the taxonomic tables dominating linguistic study. Thus, Metz's infamous "grand syntagmatic" divided films into autonomous segments based on syntactic types (in 1966 there were six, and in 1968, they numbered eight). By the 1970s, Metz had abandoned the entire Ptolemaic enterprise, confessing that his project had failed and the dream of a semiology of the cinema should be retired.

The mistake damning all of Metz's work sprang from his fatal reversal of the poles in Saussure's outline of the relationship between linguistics and semiotics. Saussure characterized linguistics as a kind of subcategory of a potentially much larger field (semiology or semiotics, he dubbed it in his lectures; and the name stuck), one yet to be worked out in Saussure's time, but one which he imagined future scholars might develop much more extensively, thereby constituting linguistics as merely one subsystem within a far more comprehensive science of sign systems. Metz, like Barthes and many others, ignored this distinction, to his perilous error, and instead reified linguistics as the grand system from which all other sign systems could and should be modeled. Thus, the deep problems with the film-language analogy only

truly surfaced in the era of semiotics, the very era, ironically, where the idea of film language was pursued more rigorously, if, at times, more ridiculously.

Enter Edward Branigan. In his new book, *Projecting a Camera: Language-Games in Film Theory*, Branigan joins these language games swinging for the fences, claiming on the first page: "film theory needs to be rethought. It must seek a new relationship to its own language" (xiii). The genuine novelty Branigan brings to this rethinking lies in his approach to film theory's object of analysis, which he shifts from the nature of film itself to the *language* we use to describe film. If the film-as-language metaphor has dominated a certain strain of thinking about film for nearly a half-century, then Branigan acknowledges the metaphor as such, as only a metaphor or analogy. In this regard , all we can do is use language to describe cinema. We can only comprehend film through our language. In that sense, Branigan posits, we can dissect a "language" of cinema, namely, the language employed by theorists to define and analyze cinema, a language of and about cinema. In a sense, then, Branigan's project remains Metzian in scope—in the power of linguistic precision and the attention to lexical systems (at the very least, in a certain sense of nostalgia for Metzian totalizing projects)[1]—without committing itself to Metz's erroneous structural foundation.

But Branigan narrows his approach further. The book isn't only about the language we use in film theory to describe film. In its most powerful demonstrations of Branigan's argument, the book whittles its approach down to the language we use to describe the camera, exploring the concept of "the camera" from every imaginable theoretical angle. Thus, you will not find film analysis in this book. You will not even find many films—two or three here and there—discussed in this book. Instead, Branigan interrogates descriptions, assumptions, and definitions (however ill) of the camera as commonly employed by a number of the theories dominating (or formerly dominating) film studies. And, perhaps more valuably, Branigan argues for a more grounded, proper, and flexible usage of the term "camera." In a densely packed chapter (number three, which offers the core of the book's argument), Branigan explicates eight different uses of the term "camera." He notes, in a brilliant example of his deep thinking, that "camera" rarely refers to an actual physical camera. For Branigan, the term "camera" represents more of a malleable heuristic that we employ to describe our acts of looking at films, our experience and understanding of the compositional framing, of characters, or of situations in the narrative.

Branigan's book serves up a complicated work of intricate, dense theorizing, weaving issues together through a complex matrix of analytical arguments, critique, and expositional outlines of valuable concepts outside of the domain of film studies, replete with pertinent and parsing references to important works by Deleuze, Zizek, Kant, Plato, Barthes, Nelson Goodman, and, of course, Wittgenstein, and the typical roster of film theorists. Branigan seems to have read everything, and thoroughly. This can make the book a tough haul at times (one silly zinger of a footnote offers a summary of Einstein's special theory of relativity). Advanced graduate seminars represent the most apt and likely destination for this book. To fully comprehend Branigan's work, you feel the need to read Wittgenstein and Chomsky, and many others. Indeed, pushing film scholars into new work in philosophy (and even science) represents one of

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[1] See Branigan's reference to Metz in "Wittgenstein, Language-Games, Film Theory," p. 6, available at www.filmandmedia.ucsb.edu/people/professors/branigan/index.html.

Branigan's goals in shaking up film theory (with its tiresome (though thankfully fading) reliance on Lacan and the Usual Suspects). In this expansive spirit, Branigan includes an intricately structured 25-page bibliography divided into almost 20 subjects (add to that, nearly 100 pages of dense endnotes; and if you add the index to these sections, then, all together, they almost equal the actual text of the book, clocking in at just over 200 pages). There are enough ideas in here for five books. Yet despite the incredible depth of the writing and the complicated design of the book itself, Branigan offers a fairly tight argument. Without watering down the book too much (although that remains a risk necessarily taken by any book review), Branigan's core proposition calls for a set of film theories that remain firmly grounded in an understanding of the embodied nature of our language and cognitive abilities. In this regard, Branigan draws upon the cognitive philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson who approach language and thinking as conceptual activities rooted in the nature of our embodied experience. To simplify, a clear-cut concept and phrase like "Branigan is in touch with the work of Lakoff and Johnson" describes a close connection between thinkers by referencing our embodied sense of touching and spatial proximity. According to Lakoff and Johnson, all of our cognitive activity can be characterized in this way.

Branigan employs these ideas to chip away at the inconsistent logic (both in terms of concepts and metaphors) at work in a number of leading film theories and to build up a new understanding of our experience of films, particularly—as an illustrative example of the power of his new approach to film theory—the ways in which we use the term "camera" to describe our comprehension of films. The camera, according to Branigan, becomes a metaphor, a stand-in, or an analogy for concepts like perspective, attention, scrutiny, meaning, and the author or artist. To say, for example, that the camera frames a telephone or zooms in on a character's emotional reaction only means that our attention focuses on these elements. In other words, when we say the camera closes in on an object, we're really saying that our attention or comprehension established that thing as significant (to the story, to a character, to the director, or many other reasons). Comprehension, for Branigan, remains an *act* by spectators and "camera" forms part of the language we use—as in the above examples—to describe this comprehension. Therefore, Branigan argues, a film theory must remain alert to this understanding of language.

On his website, Branigan describes his new book as "a detailed, far-reaching, sly attack on a century of film theory."[2] But make no mistake about it: this is a full-scale attack, salting the earth as the pages turn. At one point, Branigan even offers us a scorching chart: "Nearly Vacuous Causal Formulas about Film" (194), condemning many of the major concepts in film studies to a theoretical void. Admittedly, quite a few of the formulas on the list will not suffer much from the attack since they've already long expired. For example, Branigan, by way of demonstrating the clarifying power of his new approach to film interpretation, offers a sustained attack on "suture" theory. While Branigan's critique remains useful and dazzling, suture theory has been out of business for a long time. The work of Jean-Pierre Oudert or Kaja Silverman does not really require such a theoretical undermining, since they could be attacked simply for their bogus argumentative style and the dense discursive masquerade of jargon and citations that camouflaged their fallacious logic. Better to move on to the power of Branigan's new theoretical work, than demolish a bankrupt trend in film studies (with all due respect to the rigor of Branigan's demolition).

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[2] www.filmandmedia.ucsb.edu/people/professors/branigan/index.html

Yet, at other times, the book remains a little too generous and cautious in its critiques. Branigan often attacks unspecific targets of what he calls metaphysical conceptions of the camera. Too much of the reader's effort goes into ferreting out the specific theorist under attack. If film theory needs rethinking, if so many theorists messed up, then a fruitful explication identifying the exact mistakes performed by particular theorists would liven the debate and sharpen our understanding of the issues, as well as the merits of Branigan's contributions. Certainly, academic debates can become too polemical, too petty, and too political (in terms of professional associations). In this sense, Branigan's generosity appears refreshing. But something stronger seems in order here, especially when you're nailing accusatory lists (of the "vacuous ideas" category) to the doors of the academy. To take one example, Bordwell's recent critique of Zizek—provoked by the Hegelian huckster himself, not by Bordwell—offers greater clarity about the opposing positions.[3] Branigan's own argument might have been sharpened by a similar approach.

The emphasis Branigan places upon the shaping force that language plays in all film theory necessarily opens up his approach to the role of reception, and, as he acknowledges, the role of social, cultural, and historical contexts. In other words, a film theorist, Branigan argues, must remain alert to the shaping forces of history, of particular spectators, of culture, in scrutinizing film theory, for any and all of these categories factor into the language employed to describe and comprehend film. Yet the degree to which Branigan's approach allows for and recognizes a cultural and historical dimension remains a question that escapes full explication in this book. A number of times Brangian cites with approval Bordwell's *Making Meaning*, a text quite skeptical of and even hostile to cultural studies approaches, but where Branigan draws the line remains unclear. Would he, for example, sanction Anne Friedberg's recent *The Virtual Window*, a book exploring the conceptual and metaphoric mobility (historical and cultural) of the notion of "framing" in cinema, painting, and computer screens?[4] We can't answer this question since Branigan never fully articulates the foul lines demarcating the language-games of film theory. No doubt, they change with the context; but how a 'theory-game' playing with cultural, historical, or social factors might avoid ending up on Branigan's list of "vacuous" ideas goes unanswered.

Given the corrective tone dominating Branigan's book, the way, that is, in which he severely warns against improper and inconsistent metaphors employed in the language of film theory and criticism, you start to yearn—a little bit anxiously at times (as when you read Wittgenstein on language)—for some sense of what forms (linguistic and argumentative) of film criticism meet Branigan's approval. Thankfully, on page 207, Branigan offers us a sanctioned example from Gerald Mast. In this short excerpt, Mast dissects a single shot from a Chaplin film in which the great clown mimes his indecision, contemplation, and finally his resolution. Mast divides the shot into three spatial sections representing different mental states as the clown moves forward across the frame. A nice bit of writing, but an unfortunate choice. For one thing, Mast's neat division remains entirely conceptual, with no necessary relation to the screen itself (as conceptual as anything from the days of structuralism and Metzian semiotics). For another thing, the cognitivist-constructivist school tends to produce formal analyses that too often read as what might be called allegories of thinking. As with so many other theories, as with, for example, deconstructive critics,

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[3] www.davidbordwell.net/essays/zizek.php

[4] http://thevirtualwindow.net

who always seemed to "discover" deconstructive activity in the analyzed texts themselves (which were then heralded for adhering to the theory's principles), the cognitive school tends to unveil the way formal structure parallels the cognitive processing performed by a spectator. The sample from Mast—long gone before the cognitive school eked out a brief role for itself in film studies—comes off as a little trite in this sense. The shot, after all, also offers a single recording of Chaplin artfully miming human activity, entirely comprehensible without any triadic division of the frame. Mast's analysis would work just as well as a description of Chaplin's expressive body movement, without recourse to some formal connection between composition and cognition.

This emphasis on cognitive psychology and philosophy links Branigan's new book to his previous one, 1992's *Narrative Comprehension and Cinema*. His new work simply moves the issue of comprehension (how we construct understandings of film through our cognitive concepts and experience) to a well-honed exploration of the language-games known as film theory. In this sense, Branigan's new work reads like a set of sensible prescriptions: "Be careful with the way you phrase your descriptions of film form." "Be consistent with your metaphorical constructions." "Don't build elaborate systems that remain ungrounded."

If the book only added up to such admonitions, then Branigan's work, while offering strong and timely advice to a field once overwrought with confusing, convoluted, and casually careless language, would barely qualify as an interesting project. But Branigan is up to much more here. It's not merely that film theories should be consistent and carefully constructed in their metaphors and language. No. Branigan sticks us with a much stronger position. He argues that film theories should be based on an understanding of the embodied nature of our language. Theories are "vacuous," for example, because they use disembodied language (or misuse it). If, for example, the term camera remains a concept we employ to comprehend components of a film, then the proper and strongest usage of this term in a theoretical framework are those that remain rooted in the embodied nature (basic cognitive and emotive responses) of these language games. This emphasis on cognitive theory offers us a kind of lexical and conceptual measuring stick for evaluating the validity of film theories. That's why Branigan resorts to the work of Lakoff and Johnson. That's why he heralds the work of Wittgenstein. Branigan turns to these thinkers in order to militate for a grounding of film theory in an understanding of the embodied nature of our cognition and language.

As a bystander to these debates I feel it is important to accentuate the challenge Branigan presents here. Some portions of the book strike a seemingly balanced, even pluralistic or relativistic tone, one that might obscure the overall thrust of its argument. Often these sections remain the most strongly Wittgensteinian, in the sense that the language-games of various theories get framed under their different uses and purposes. From this perspective, the language games of various film theories, then, need to be understood for their different goals: none the better; none the worse. But the emphasis Branigan places on cognitive philosophy (even while Lakoff veers into a similar relativism in some of his own work) strikes a harsher note. If the various film theories remain only different language games, then, Branigan argues, they all possess a blind spot, in that they fail to acknowledge the embodied nature of their conceptual and linguistic structures. Whether other Wittgensteinian scholars will welcome or resist this latter move by Branigan remains an open question (one beyond my level of expertise). Thus, while his book recognizes

the existence of many film theories, Branigan only sanctions or legitimizes those aware of, rooted in, and self-consciously working with the embodied nature of our language-games and cognitive activity. That is a strong challenge, and far from "sly." Progress will come from dealing with this challenge head on. It will be interesting to observe the reaction from other film theorists. Let the language games begin.