



# Spectacular metaphors

## From theatre to cinema

Spectacular  
metaphors

Thomaz Wood Jr  
FGV-EAESP, São Paulo, Brazil

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**Keywords** *Metaphors, Theatre, Cinema*

**Abstract** *The use of metaphoric language has grown in prevalence in recent years. Frontline organizations have become “magical kingdoms”: ethereal places where image and substance rarely coincide, and where metaphors turn into powerful tools for consultants and change agents. At the same time, scholars explore the “wonderful world of metaphors”. Once simple figures of speech, metaphors have been transformed into a respectable approach for organizational analysis. Although millenarian, the theatre metaphor constitutes an attractive system of ideas for studying organizational phenomena. In this paper, the theatre metaphor is used as a point of departure for the development of another dramaturgical metaphor: the cinema metaphor. It is suggested that the latter might provide a better perspective for studying contemporary organizations in the age of spectacle.*

Submitted June 2001  
Revised October 2001  
Accepted October 2001

The screen opens its white walls to a harem of marvellous adolescent sights and sounds, faced with which the most adorable real body appears deformed (René Clair, quoted by Hill (1992, p. 15)).

### **Introduction: understanding metaphors?**

Metaphoric reasoning is a key human skill that functions like a series of bridges which lead to the construction of high-order mental links between entities (Beck, 1987). In simple terms, metaphors interact and come to describe the world in the production of reality/ies where different metaphors inevitably produce different realities.

But what does it mean, ultimately, to say that a metaphor was understood? According to Gibbs and Hall (1987), it is the proponent's intention when he or she suggests or uses a metaphor that is the key to understanding its meaning. Understanding, therefore, involves discovering a system of common points, which are associated with the metaphor and its object. Understanding also includes recognition, on the part of the interlocutor, of the author's intention when he or she makes a specific declaration.

This paper proposes and explores the cinema metaphor. The theatre metaphor is used as a point of departure from which to develop the cinema metaphor. The argument is that the cinema metaphor is appropriate to contemporary analysis and both reflects and transmits the spirit of the times. The cinema metaphor also captures the baffling sense of organization and of organizing within the society of spectacle.

The first section of the paper addresses the theatre metaphor through the work of Kenneth Burke and Erving Goffman and examines their seminal

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An early version of this paper was presented at Organizational Theatre Sub Theme Group of the EGOS meeting, Lyon, July 2001. The author would like to thank Ana Paula Paes de Paula, Saara Taalas and Virpi Leikola for their insightful comments.



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contributions to the field. The second section deals with the “Age of spectacle” which corresponds to a cinematic society. In the following section, an outline for a cinema metaphor is put forward and, in the final section, an evaluation summary of the findings is presented.

### **Theatre: a millenary metaphor**

In order to propose a metaphor of cinema, it is necessary to first explain the theatre metaphor in order to make sense of the transpositions that have occurred in the move from one to the other. The idea of the world as the stage on which people successively take up and discard roles is not new (Burns, 1972; Riggins, 1993). The theatre metaphor is in fact millenarian. References to human beings as marionettes in the hands of the gods and human life as tragedy and comedy go back to classical Greek theatre. There are various uses of metaphors of dramatic representation which go back to the time of Plato. Similar ideas are found in Horace and Seneca’s works and in those of the early Christians (Curtius, 1967).

The Middle Ages provides countless examples of dramatic work related to Christian mystery cycles and the church calendar. This provides ample opportunity for dramatic work to serve as a metaphor for the theatricality of everyday life. For instance, in a somewhat later work, *Don Quixote*, by Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), the following dialogue can be found (Lyman and Scott, 1975, p. 1):

“... Come, tell me [says Don Quixote], hast thou not seen a play acted in which kings, emperors, pontiffs, knights, ladies, and divers other personages were introduced? One plays the villain, another the knave, this one the merchant, that the soldier, one the sharp-witted fool, another the foolish lover; and when the play is over, and they have put off the dresses they wore in it, all the actors become equal.”

“Yes, I have seen that,” said Sancho.

“Well then,” said Don Quixote, “the same thing happens in the comedy and life of this world, where some play emperors, others popes, and, in short, all the characters that can be brought into a play; but when it is over, that is to say when life ends, death strips them all of the garments that distinguish one from the other, and all are equal in the grave.”

“A fine comparison!” said Sancho; “though not so new but that I have heard it many and many a time, ...”

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Cervantes’ contemporary, used his theatre not only as a vehicle for poetry, but directly as a metaphor of reality (Van den Berg, 1985). Among other many outstanding lines, Jaque’s speech in *As You Like It* is a classic of its type (Lyman and Scott, 1975, p. 3):

... All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances:  
And one man in his time plays many parts, ...

There are several reasons for the popularity of the theatre metaphor in sociology and in organizational studies, but probably one of the most significant is that the sense that life is acting, that everyone is actor, that life is a stage is becoming more and more a matter of day-to-day experience (Riggins,

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1993). In our daily affairs, our interactions with other people are situated between two extremes: on one side, we have the so-called natural situations, in which the sensation of spontaneity predominates; and on the other, we have the so-called theatrical situations, in which the perception of behaviors aimed at manipulating impressions is stronger. Therefore, one reason why the theatre metaphor is important is that, arguably, natural situations are becoming more and more rare while theatrical situations are becoming more and more common. As an analytical approach, the theatre metaphor can provide tools for exploring social encounters, and can distinguish form, content, structure, significance and grammar. Such tools help to systematize the study of such events and to place the observer in a different relation to the subject of the study.

### **Kenneth Burke and dramatism**

Kenneth Burke was a forerunner in the analysis of social processes by giving value to interpretive processes in the study of human interaction (Gusfield, 1989). For Burke, social life is inherently dramatic, because it involves conflict, uncertainty, rhetoric and choice. Burke (1962) gave the name of dramatism to his perspective of human interaction analysis and proposed five terms as generating principles for his investigation. Each of these terms corresponds to one question:

- (1) what was done, what happened? – the act;
- (2) when or where was it done? – the scene, the situation in which the act took place;
- (3) who did it? – the agent, the person who commanded the act;
- (4) how did she/he do it? – the means or instruments which the agent used; and
- (5) why did she/he do it? – the purpose of the act.

Dramatism is also a method used to explain social action and the corresponding interpretations for these actions (Mangham and Overington, 1983). Its use helps the actors to locate mystifications and reveal them. The basic assumption of the method is the same as the one present in the theoretical proposition by Erving Goffman that people are actors who interpret characters in everyday scenes.

### **Erving Goffman and the dramaturgical analysis**

In the field of sociology, the influence of Goffman (1975) is so great that his name is frequently used as a synonym for the dramaturgical perspective. Goffman's central point of analysis is how an individual presents her/himself in day-to-day situations and seeks to control the impression he/she causes. The following paragraphs summarize some key ideas in his work. This serves to provide a foundation for the understanding of the basis of the theatrical metaphor and to demonstrate how it shifts in the move to a cinematic metaphor.

The first concept to be considered is social entity. For Goffman, a social entity is any place limited by the perception of where an activity takes place. There is a tacit, invisible agreement between the audience and actors to sustain the performance, avoiding breaks and instabilities.

Another of Goffman's key ideas is the difference between the actor-individual – the maker of impressions, who plays a role – and the persona-individual – the figure that the acting should evoke. The persona does not precede the scene, but materializes within it. The self, consequently, becomes a “hook” on which a collaborative construction can be hung; it is a product of stage arrangements.

According to Goffman, individuals are moved not by the moral desire of achieving certain standards, but by the moral question of creating an impression of meeting those standards. This is a significant dramatic achievement and consonant with the contemporary use of the Greek word for actor, *hypocrite*.

This approach provides a perspective for analyzing social situations. The priorities of dramaturgical perspective are the descriptions of the techniques for manipulating impressions in a given environment and the study of problems resulting from this manipulation.

Goffman's analysis of human interaction has been compared to that undertaken by Burke (Gusfield, 1989). However, there are differences between the two approaches which go beyond the label: Goffman calls his approach dramaturgical and Burke calls his dramatism. The fundamental difference is that Goffman emphasizes the art of illusion. The actor is a professional illusionist, dramaturgy is the art of illusion, the stage is a metaphor, and reality and stage are two distinct things. Burke, on the other hand, does not use drama as a metaphor for human action. In Burke's work, the image is an image of interaction, of drama.

### **Theorists of the cinematic society**

*Daniel Boorstin: the image, pseudo-events and celebrities*

For those who believe that the fusion of fiction and reality is a recent phenomenon, Boorstin's (1962) book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America* appears almost prophetic. Boorstin carried out historical research, showing how US society developed a veritable fetish for the new. To sustain this obsession, the USA began to generate pseudo-events when real ones were lacking and create celebrities to compensate for the absence of heroes.

Boorstin (1962, p. 4) claims that Americans have become so accustomed to illusions that they mistake them for reality. The reality began to be inhabited by artificial novelties. These are pseudo-events, that contain an ambiguous relationship with reality and are created with the specific purpose of provoking determined reactions in the audience (Boorstin, 1962, p. 11). The cinema and, more recently, TV began to produce an aberration: we live in a world where the image appears to be more trustworthy than the original and fantasy is more real than reality.

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*Guy Debord: the society of spectacle*

While Boorstin (1962) registered the tendencies related to the prevalence of the image over reality, Debord (1994) formulated a theory on the construction of a society based on image. Hence he showed himself to be frankly pessimistic with regard to the direction being taken by what he called the society of the spectacle. Analyzing the breakdown of the Soviet bloc – in the preface of a US edition of his work – Debord states that the spectacularization, together with other trends, leads to the dictatorial liberty of the market, combined with recognition of the rights of the *homo spectator*.

The spectacularization is a consequence and an objective of modernizing production conditions, which breaks the unit of life, withdrawing images from it and grouping them together into a large and unique flow. A separate world is created, in which the relation between people is mediated by images. Everything that was directly experienced becomes a commodified representation. The spectacle creates a self-representation of the world that surpasses the real world itself. It works as a barrier between these two worlds, keeping them isolated.

But the spectacle is not abstract. It is not something added to the real world. The spectacle “is capital accumulated to the point at which it becomes image” (Debord, 1994, p. 24). It manifests itself in the news media, in advertising, in public relations work, in cultural activities and in personal interactions. The spectacle is “at the heart of society’s real unreality” (Debord, 1994, p. 13).

The spectacle is manifested as grand narrative, totalizing, justifying, legitimizing and celebrating the system. It is not a superficial phenomenon. The whole of society and the social phenomena are based on and permeated by the spectacle. The spectacle is also a product of this same society, a product which results from and refines the system’s reflexive rationality.

The *homo spectator* does not live in the spectacle society, but merely contemplates it. She/he is a supporting actor, under pressure to find her/his role and act it. The spectacle provides the script, the act and the speech, and even evaluates the performance. In the spectacle, the individual lacking in individuality seeks – and finds – comfort for her/his needs and her/his desires. In fact, the spectacle itself determines which needs and desires are valid and suitable.

*Norman Denzin: cinema and the game of the real*

Echoing previous works in the 1990s, US sociologist Denzin (1995) defends the view that society reflects the cinema. According to him, the cinema was responsible for creating a parallel reality, an official version of civil society. The cinematographic apparatus reproduces dominant social values, preconceptions and notions of right and wrong. It organizes and gives sense to the world. It creates the cinematic society.

This form of art, during the twentieth century, progressively developed the epistemology of scientific realism (see Allen, 1993; Andrew, 1976; MacCabe, 1976; Bazin, 1971; Metz, 1971). This new cultural logic redefined the form in

which the world is experienced. The cinema is thus a game of the real. The screen is simultaneously reality and perception. With the cinema, the camera's viewfinder consolidated its supremacy over the human eye.

In the world of voyeurs-spectators, the screen world begins peopling the audience's feelings, imagination, and fantasies. The cinematographic Other alters the reference system, its interlocutors' perception and self-perception. Consequently, the cinematic society might be considered a disciplining structure, peopled by voyeurs who obsessively spy on one another.

The cinematographic gaze is hegemonic and omnipresent. Nothing escapes it. All dilemmas and social questions are addressed and trivialized. The cinema created a visual and aesthetic illusion starting from classical theatre and from Victorian melodramatic literature. This illusion started to mediate the relationship between the individual and her/his peers and with the medium (see Andrew, 1984). In this process, reality is transformed into a cinematographic production. Real experiences then begin to be judged against their corresponding experience on film (Denzin, 1995, p. 32).

The cinema once had a monopoly on images. Today, it shares this space with other media that also produce and generate images, such as TV, video, video games and the Internet. The flow of images is without beginning or end. The image does not represent anything in particular any more. The image exists for itself, "not transmissible to others, objectivistic, pure exchange value, definitely deprived of transparency", as observed Chevre (1987, p. 27). These then are some of the issues which arise from the study of cinema as art form, as mediator of social life and as means of reproduction.

### **Cinema as metaphor**

Up to this point in the paper, the attempt has been made to identify reasons which demonstrate the need for a cinematographic perspective: the emergence of a cinematic society. It is now appropriate to identify the "meaning" of the cinema metaphor, explaining the intention of such a metaphor in organizational studies.

The theatre metaphor, in spite of being millenarian, still constitutes a powerful instrument for revealing facts beyond appearances. However, specific twentieth and twenty-first centuries phenomena must be incorporated into the dramaturgical perspective.

By proposing the cinema metaphor, the objective is to establish a perspective for studying organizational phenomena. What the cinema metaphor seeks to stress is the phenomenon of *spectacularization* of social life, a phenomenon which finds echo in the organizational world. The cinema metaphor exists in relation to the theatre metaphor. Both are dramaturgical metaphors and are related to a vision of the world which associates reality to the so-called performing arts. In some aspects, the cinema metaphor is an extension of the theatre metaphor; in other aspects they are antagonistic. Table I summarizes the similarities and differences between the two metaphors.

Theatre metaphor	Cinema metaphor
<i>Foci</i>	
Discusses how individuals play themselves in day-to-day scenes	Expands the dimensions of role-playing in space and time
Analyzes the manipulation of impression	Adds the spectacle-dimension
<i>Perspective on organization</i>	
Defines organization as a <i>locus</i> whose boundaries are set by the perception of the performance of an activity	Defines organization as an open system, embedded in the environment
<i>Emphasis</i>	
Focuses on the agreement between audience and actors to maintain the act	Focuses on the fragmentation and complexity of relationships among actors, and the “fusion” between actor and audience
<i>Basic definitions</i>	
The individual as actor	The medium – cinema, TV, Internet – as an intervening part in the construction of reality
The individual as character	
The being as a set of characters	
<i>Analysis unit</i>	
Considers face-to-face interaction	Considers the interaction among images and among discourses
<i>Perspective on human behavior</i>	
Seeks to segregate natural and artificial behaviors	Considers naturalness and artificiality as texts of an indivisible whole

**Table I.**  
Dramatic metaphors

Cinema history can be considered as the history of its emancipation from theatre (Sontag, 1991). First, the cinema was emancipated from the theatre’s frontal dimension, eliminating the fourth wall, represented by the camera’s fixed position. Second, the cinema was freed from the theatre’s exaggerated gestures, which became unnecessary with the use of zoom lenses and close-ups. Third, the cinema eliminated the distance between the audience and the act, in a certain way transporting the spectators into the scene. These three movements correspond to a transition from the static to the fluid and from the artificial to the natural.

The theatre employs artifices. In many plays, the artifice is outlined. The cinema also uses artifices. Ever since its origin, with Mielès, cinema has been the art of illusion. However, paradoxically, cinema is also an art that is committed to the discourse of reality. In the cinema, the artifices – the special effects – are camouflaged.

Cinema is a media-dependent art. We see a film which was registered by means of a technical apparatus and is being projected by means of another technical apparatus. The film is the record of an ephemeral moment. A theatre play, to the contrary, is seen while it is happening. Cinema is a time machine, which is able to retain in the memory and transport us to other times. The mediation of the cinematographic apparatus opens possibilities in time and

space that are unimaginable in the theatre. Another difference is related to the relationship between the audience and the performance. In the theatre, the space is usually static. The spectator is confined. In the cinema, the spectator also occupies a fixed seat but, aesthetically, she/he is subject to an experience of permanent movement (Sontag, 1991, p. 104; Andrew, 1976, p. 86).

Theatre and cinema, although two dramaturgical manifestations, use different approaches for characters. Theatrical characters tend to be ideal types while cinematographic characters are more individualized. On the other hand, theatrical characters tend to be more profound, while cinematographic characters are generally superficial. Theatre and cinema also differ in relation to the form of connecting images and sequences. The basic unit in cinematographic language is not the image, or the act, as it is the case in theatre, but the connection between images, the relationship between present, previous and subsequent takes (Andrew, 1976, pp. 42-75; Machado, 1982).

### **Towards a cinematographic dramatism?**

The previous sections have sought to develop the cinema metaphor concept as a perspective, a root-metaphor, and sought to explain the concept by contrasting it with the theatre metaphor. It is now appropriate to speculate on a cinematographic extension of Burke's dramatism.

The questions to be addressed are the following: first, what modifications should be made in the five elements of dramatism in order to establish a cinema metaphor. This needs to be addressed via the differences between the theatre metaphor and the cinema metaphor. Second, what categories should be excluded or added?

The cinematographic dramatism should review the five elements proposed by Burke (1962), considering the characteristics of the cinema metaphor: the extended dimensions of time and space, the inability to separate stage and audience, the simultaneity of events, the fragmentation of interactions, the interference of the media and the spectacle dimension.

For example, the scene could be substituted by the *mise-en-scène*, which refers to the control on what is happening in front of the camera and involves questions related to what to film and how to film it. It is a complex activity, comprising elements such as framing, shooting angle, lighting, composition, scenery and costumes. The use of this concept can expand dramaturgical analysis to include new symbolic elements – artifacts, myths, sagas, success stories, etc. – emphasizing the balance between these and other elements.

Cinematographic dramatism could also include some additional elements such as editing. Films develop as much spatially – through the *mise-en-scène* – as temporally – through editing (Monaco, 1981). Editing is a dialectic process of constructing senses, as demonstrated by film-maker Sergei Eisenstein in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Cinematographic editing may be related to the processes of managing the meanings (Smircich and Morgan, 1982), the concept of enactment (Weick, 1979, 1993) and to the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia and

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Chittipeddi, 1991). All these occur in a fragmented form and under continuous symbolic interaction. From this perspective, the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) may be seen as a continuous editing of scenes during a process which includes reorganizing the past and re-formulating values.

## Conclusion

In this paper, a new perspective for organizational studies is discussed: the cinema metaphor. First, the paper has presented a brief outline of the concept of metaphor and emphasized its importance to cognitive processes through its capacity to generate alternative views and insights. Then, it deals with the theatre metaphor, emphasizing the seminal contributions by Erving Goffman and Kenneth Burke. Then, the cinema metaphor as a concept is outlined in order to give form to a perspective and to make use of the ideas of Daniel Boorstin, Guy Debord and Norman Denzin. After this view of the world had been established, it has sought to identify the elements and principles of the cinema metaphor in a more explicit form.

As with any metaphor, the cinema metaphor consists of a way of seeing, as much as of a way of not seeing the phenomena (see Alvesson, 1993; Morgan, 1986). As with any other metaphor, it has both strengths and weaknesses. Its principal strength is that the cinema metaphor extends the dramaturgical perspective in various ways: by including the spectacle-dimension and expanding the play's dimensions, by considering the media as interfering in the production of reality and by considering the multiplicity of discourses. This metaphor also provides a complex perspective of relations and reflects the spirit of the times. However, the characteristics that distinguish this metaphor may also contribute to its weaknesses. The cinema metaphor's principal limitation as a device for exploring organizations is the difficulty of developing an appropriate method of analysis. The intention of this paper has been to examine where the cinema metaphor has advantages over the more traditional theatre metaphor. By identifying how these differ, it is hoped that the paper will contribute to a greater appreciation of the value and uses of the cinema metaphor for the examination of organizational issues and contexts.

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