# CINEMATOGRAPHY OF HORROR: A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF FEAR IN SCREEN ADAPTATION OF STEPHEN KING'S NOVEL "THE MIST"

# КІНЕМАТОГРАФ ЖАХІВ: МУЛЬТИМОДАЛЬНИЙ АНАЛІЗ СТРАХУ НА МАТЕРІАЛІ ЕКРАНІЗАЦІЇ РОМАНУ СТІВЕНА КІНГА "THE MIST"

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This article deals with the multimodal construction of fear in horror cinema based on the analysis of Frank Darabont's screen adaptation of Stephen King's "The Mist". The cinematic discourse is shown as inherently complex and multimodal, with the horror genre presenting a unique opportunity to examine how different modes interact to engage the audience in the process of shared meaning making. While horror films are highly popular, they remain underexamined from a multimodal analytical perspective. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA) and film semiotics, particularly the works of Kress, Bateman, Metz, and Eco, this research investigates how fear is constructed through narrative and a complex interplay of verbal, visual, and auditory signs.

The employed methodology involves sampling and contextual interpretation of key script excerpts and corresponding film sequences. The analysis highlights the extensive use of close-ups, over-the-shoulder shots, lighting, sound design, camera movement, and character reactions as key tools in building emotional tension. Particular attention is given to diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, such as sirens, ambient noise, and Mark Isham's soundtrack, which function alongside visual cues to construct an atmosphere of uncertainty.

The research findings suggest that horror cinema employs multimodal resources to craft sensory experiences. The analyzed film employs an array of cinematic techniques to construct fear. From reaction shots to over-the-shoulder camera compositions, the cinematic means allow the audience to experience the fear as dynamically as possible. Additionally, the analysis emphasizes the critical role of the soundscapes, particularly in the neoclassical song "The Host of Seraphim" by Dead Can Dance. Overall, the film testifies to the complex nature of fear and its multimodal representation in cinematic discourse.

**Key words:** multimodal discourse analysis, cinematic discourse, fear, Stephen King, horror.

Статтю присвячено вивченню мультимодальності страху в жанрі жахів на основі аналізу екранізації твору Стівена Кінга "The Mist". Кінематографічний дискурс представлено як складну мультимодальну систему, де жанр жахів постає інформативним рнпозиторієм для дослідження взаємодії різних модальностей з метою залучення глядача до процесу спільного смислотворення. Попри високу популярність, зазначений жанр залишається недостатньо дослідженим з погляду мультимодального аналізу. Спираючись на теоретичні засади мультимодального дискурс-аналізу та семіотики кіно, зокрема на праці Кресса (Kress), Бейтмена (Bateman), Меца (Metz) та Еко (Eco), дослідження розглядає побудову страху як комплексну взаємодію вербальних, візуальних і звукових кодів. Методологія передбачає застосування методу вибірки для підбору епізодів і структурних елементів скриптів для подальшого аналізу та контекстуальну інтерпретацію ключових фрагментів сценарію й відповідних кінематографічних епізодів.

Проведений аналіз засвідчив про широке використання таких кінематографічних підходів як великий план, кадр «через плече», зміна освітлення, звуковий супровід і рух камери як основних у створенні емоційної напруги. Особливу увагу приділено дієгетичним і недієгетичним звукам, що разом із візуальними модусами формують атмосферу страху. Результати дослідження підтвердили, що кінематограф жанру жахів активно використовує мультимодальні ресурси. Проаналізований фільм свідчить про використання різноманітних кінематографічних засобів для побудови страху, що дозволяє глядачеві переживати зазначену емоцію максимально динамічно. Окремо підкреслюється роль звукового супроводу, зокрема композиції "The Host of Seraphim" у виконанні Dead Can Dance. Мультимодальний аналіз фільму дав змогу засвідчити про складну природу страху та його мультимодальну репрезентацію в кінематографічному дискурсі.

**Ключові слова:** мультимодальний дискурс-аналіз, кінодискурс, страх, Стівен Кінг, жанр жахів.

**Problem setting.** Cinematic discourse is a vivid example of artistic expression. Just as language uses words as signs to convey meaning, films use a variety of visual and auditory signs, i.e., images, colors, and camera angles, to communicate ideas and construct narratives. This integration allows filmmakers to evoke emotional responses from the audience through a combination of sensory stimuli.

Among cinematic genres, horror has experienced a notable surge in public attention. From slasher pictures to psychological thrillers, horror films have captured a prominent space in cinematic discourse. However, despite its apparent popularity, horror cinema remains largely underexplored in scholarly literature. The identified research gap highlights the need to approach horror films from a multimodal

perspective. As the central concept of the horror genre, fear is not conveyed exclusively through narrative but rather through an array of unique cinematic modes. The analysis of cinematic representation of fear as a multimodal phenomenon can yield critical insights into how horror films convey meaning. Hence, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the genre by approaching fear as a multimodal cinematographic phenomenon based on the screen adaptation of Stephen King's psychological thriller "The Mist".

**Recent research findings**. The multimodality of cinematic discourse has been on the radar of linguistics and film studies, as evident in the research carried out by Kress, Bateman, Schmidt, Krysanova, and others. According to Kress (2011), discourse is constructed through multiple semiotic modes, i.e., gesture, image, sound, and writing, which work coherently to co-construct a unified meaning-making system [6]. As Krysanova (2020) notes, cinematic discourse functions as a type of mediated communication that facilitates an indirect exchange of meanings between the recipient (viewer) and the filmmaker (sender) through different semiotic modes [7].

In cinematic discourse, the term mode is understood as a particular way in which meaning is conveyed through sensory channels [2]. Otherwise stated, the mode is a semiotic resource or a meaning-making tool used to construct a meaningful experience for the audience. The film discourse is based on two primary semiotic modes – visual and auditory. The coherent integration of both facilitates the transmission of complex emotions, ideas, and narrative patterns. Thus, films emerge as multimodal in the sense of employing multiple channels of communication and multisemiotic [8].

To further dissect the mechanisms of meaning-making in cinema, film semiotics, particularly the work of Christian Metz and Umberto Eco, shall be presented as essential for elucidating how signs and codes function within cinematic discourse. Metz (1974) introduced the term "cinematic signifier", where meaning emerges not through direct linguistic substitution, but through an interplay of images, editing, and sound [9]. His notion of the "imaginary signifier" points to the psychological and symbolic layers of cinematic representation. These notions serve as critical conceptual constructs in the context of given research, as they refer to the potential representational ambiguity of fear ("imaginary signifier").

Eco (1976) categorized film into clusters of semiotic codes, including perceptive, gestural, iconic, musical, and editing codes [4]. These can function

individually and jointly to generate meaning. For instance, a slow pan accompanied by a minor key soundtrack and close-up facial expressions transmit a sense of melancholy or suspense. As illustrated in this example, the integration of a few semiotic codes supports the definition of a film as a highly structured semiotic system, where meaning is not merely inferred from individual elements but from their interdependent interaction.

**Methodology and objectives**. Multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA) emerges as one of the most relevant methodologic approaches to exploring the complexity of cinematic discourse. This article applies MMDA to uncover how language, visual framing, and audial backgrounds interact to produce meaning in the cinematic discourse of the film "The Mist". A sampling method was employed to identify and extract appropriate script excerpts and respective film episodes for in-depth analysis. The method of contextual interpretation was used to examine the interplay between verbal (script excerpts) and non-verbal (characters' facial expressions, camera angles, lighting, audial backgrounds) elements in defining fear. The key objective of the article was to identify and explore the multimodal means used in the cinematic discourse of "The Mist" to construct the concept of fear.

**Discussion**. Horror films occupy a special place in cinematography due to their unique capacity to elicit intense emotional responses. While the goal of instilling fear in the audience might seem self-evident, achieving it presupposes activating multiple semiotic modes. Our research focuses on the screen adaptation of Stephen King's psychological thriller "The Mist" to explore how visual, auditory, and cinematic techniques work together to engage viewers in a shared process of constructing and experiencing fear as a central emotion of the film. King's corpus of literary texts has been a prolific source of cinematographic inspiration, as evident in their numerous screen adaptations, including "Thinner", "Pet Sematary", "Cell", "Doctor Sleep", "Misery", "Secret Window", "The Mist", "Firestarter", "It", and more. Drawing on MMDA and methods of contextual interpretation, the subsequent discussion uncovers how verbal, visual, and auditory codes interact to construct fear.

The interplay of semiotic modes becomes apparent in the film's opening scenes. From the very first moments, the sensation of fear is established implicitly through ambiguity, suggestion, and sensory tension. The initial introduction to the paranormal activities occurring in the city since the last night's thunderstorm is defined by the pronoun *something*. In the screenplay, the display of an unknown

character who escapes the mist and tries to enter the supermarket is described as follows:

*People **gasp**. There's a MAN staggering across the parking lot toward the store, **blood splashing from his nose down his shirt**. People press toward the glass, watching **in shock**, as the man almost falls once or twice, bursts into the store:*
*BLOODY NOSE*
***Something in the fog**! Something in the fog took John Lee! Something...* [4].

Proceeded with the wailing sound of a siren going off, the unexpected entrance of a yet unintroduced character (Fig. 1) changes the flow of the film scenes. The chatty ambiance in the local supermarket subsides, and people fall silent. The shot composition shifts from a steady focus on a wide area (the supermarket + the locals) to shaky shots of the first victim. The siren lamenting in the background becomes accompanied by the cries of the characters, who dismiss the warnings to stay inside the supermarket and try to get back home. The focus on diegetic sound (siren + human cries) directly engages the audience to experience the unsettling atmosphere of the approaching danger.

The following shots are focused primarily on the people's facial expressions of bewilderment (Fig. 2). In particular, Mrs. Carmody's face occupies a central position in a few shots, alongside her dooming remarks about the approaching death. As highlighted in the screenplay:

*People are **bewildered**, **confused**. A few go outside. Suddenly, **a voice cries out, urgent with fear**:*
*MRS. CARMODY*
*Don't go out there! It's **death** to go out there!...*
*A few people draw away from Mrs. Carmody, avoiding her. The vibe is turning **panicky**, and she's not helping things* [4].

It is worth noting that the initial scenes center exclusively around the characters' reactions. Reaction shots indicate characters' expressions as they witness something terrifying or unsettling. These shots allow the audience to vicariously



**Fig. 1. The Mist (00:12:07) [11]**



**Fig. 2. The Mist (00:13:22) [11]**

experience the characters' fear. People's reactions to the unknown paranormal activities are displayed as a sequence of shots of individual faces (Fig. 3). The director, Frank Darabont, uses close-ups of characters' countenances to capture their nuanced facial expressions. This way, the audience is exposed to every subtle eye twitch or sweat drop, which, in turn, intensifies the sense of realism (Fig. 3). Additionally, close-up shots build suspense and tension. When characters' faces reveal the experience of shock or fear (displayed by the wide-open eyes, open mouths, the onset of crying, and unsettling exchange of looks among the characters), the audience becomes more engaged and eagerly anticipates what might happen next.

The other framing technique extensively applied in shooting "The Mist" is the over-the-shoulder shot (Fig. 4.3). It allows the audience to see the scene from a character's perspective, immersing viewers in the genuine atmosphere of the story. Such shots are used predominantly in dialogue scenes to illustrate the relationship between characters. In particular, over-the-shoulder framing emphasizes interpersonal tension and changes in social dynamics throughout the narrative.

The last screenshot coincides with the emergence of the first ominous non-diegetic film soundtrack. Created by the renowned American musician and film composer Mark Isham, the audio landscape helps build and sustain emotional tension and suspense throughout the film. The non-diegetic background comprises eight distinct tracks entitled "Won't Somebody See a Lady Home", "Tentacles", "Bugs", "Mist", "Spiders", "Expiation", "The Host of Seraphim", and "The Vicious Blues". The first track emerges indistinctly when the character leaves the supermarket despite the locals' warnings to stay inside. The soundtrack does not have any distinct or sharp audio patterns. Conversely, it sets an ambiguous atmosphere of uncertainty and unsubstantiated fear.

**Fig. 3. The Mist (00:14:30-00:16:32) [11]**



**Fig. 4. The Mist (00:20:49-00:21:37) [11]**

*"A sly, slithery sound makes him **stop dead** in tracks. He **stands frozen, eyes wide,** listening. Only silence now...*

*There's the sound again: something **sliiiding veerrrryy slooowwly** in the darkness behind him. Then silence.*

*David turns**, heart hammering in his chest, gaze sweeping the darkness** toward the huge roll-up door. The sound comes again, louder now, from the other side..."* [4]

In the above-mentioned sequence of shots supported by the respective script descriptions

(Fig. 4), the director utilizes dim light, visual and auditory juxtaposition, and sound-silence contrasts to introduce the paranormal creatures to the audience. The use of alliteration in the script *("sly, slithery sound", "something sliiiding veerrrryy slooowwly")* creates an auditory sense of the eerie. Admittedly, it is illustrated on the screen by the corresponding slithering sounds. The soundscape evokes the assumption that something is lurking in the darkness, which immediately establishes an atmosphere of suspense. In these scenes (Fig. 4), the protagonist, David, stops abruptly upon hearing the sound, and the subsequent silence creates tension as the character and the audience await the potential emergence of yet unidentified creates. The sporadic sounds followed by silence amplify the tension. The silence creates a void that leaves both the character and the audience anticipating the next sound. The character's frozen stance and wide eyes visually depict the experience of fear. The protagonist's gaze sweeping the darkness and the focus on the huge roll-up door draw the audience's attention to potential sources of threat. The visual emphasis enhances the feeling of impending hazard. It is also worth noting that the gradual increase in the sound volume contributes to escalating the atmosphere.

In the close-ups of the characters' expressions and reactions to the sources of potential danger (Fig. 5), the director uses a strong contrast between light and shadow. The initial darkness and the sudden flood of light create a stark visual shift that underscores the characters' vulnerability. Despite the light-darkness contrasts, the film is focused predominantly on the low-key lighting that helps preserve an ominous and foreboding ambiance. Dimly lit areas with pockets of brightness increase tension, whereas flashlights as light sources define a limited field of vision that intensifies characters' isolation.

The dark color palette dominates throughout the second half of the film. It is worth pointing out that intense yelling further intensifies the state of chaos and shared experience of fear. As people shout uncontrollably, their frantic actions amplify the tension. Furthermore, the integration of visual commotion (people running away) and auditory overload (the crowd's screams, glass breaking) leads to a sensory overload that overwhelms the characters and the audience.

Particular attention should be paid to the selection of soundtracks accompanying the last film scenes. Upon exiting the supermarket, five characters become exposed to the threats hidden in the mist. At the same time, they use the only chance to escape their destiny. The neoclassical dark wave style music that gradually enters the soundscape of the scene emphasizes the contradiction between unprecedented danger and dubious salvation. The song "The Host of Seraphim" by Dead Can Dance is haunting and ethereal in its melodic nature, fitting in with the tone and atmosphere of the film. The selected piece



Fig. 5. The Mist (00:24:30–00:31:00) [11]

creates a melancholic ambiance that aligns with the film's concepts of fear, despair, and the unknown.

Hence, the screen adaptation of Stephen King's psychological horror novel "The Mist" employs a masterful blend of cinematic techniques to construct a world steeped in fear and uncertainty. As the narrative develops, the spotlight turns to the characters' reactions, and the film employs reaction shots to capture their expressions of bewilderment, fear, and despair. Such close-ups unveil the characters' emotional experiences and build tension. Additionally, the extensive use of over-the-shoulder shots allows the audience to witness the unfolding events from the characters' perspectives. Notably, the role of the soundscape is no less pivotal, particularly in the neoclassical song "The Host of Seraphim" by Dead Can Dance. The melancholic qualities of the music piece serve as a powerful emotional anchor that intensifies the climax of the narrative. Therefore, the film testifies to the role of visual and auditory storytelling in depicting the peculiarities of the horror genre.

**Conclusions.** The presented analysis exemplifies how cinematic discourse operates through an interplay of semiotic resources, including lighting, color palettes, camera angles, diegetic and non-diegetic sound, and character movement, to evoke emotional responses and reinforce the conventions of the genre. The application of MMDA allows for exploring how visual and auditory modes converge to shape a coherent narrative of horror. For instance, the film's recurring use of dim, color-drained imagery, accompanied by ambient dissonant sounds, contributes to an atmosphere of uncertainty and dread. This aligns with Kress's notion of meaning-making as distributed across multiple modes. In this way, "The Mist" becomes a site where multimodal elements intersect, offering a rich case study for the integrated analysis of cinematic discourse.

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