

Contemporary Kazakh Cinema: Semiotic Analysis of the Spatial-Objective Environment

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the role of visual and spatial dramaturgy in Kazakhstani cinema as an autonomous communicative phenomenon. It revises traditional approaches to scenography, interpreting the spatial-objective environment as a cognitive tool shaping socio-cultural codes. The study aims to move beyond descriptive art criticism to analyse the cognitive potential of film space and identify the mechanisms by which design encodes cultural meaning. First, using systemic art-historical analysis and visual semiotics, the research draws on selected films and focus group discussions. Second, findings reveal that cinematic environments have evolved from a representative function to a transformative one, actively modelling audience value horizons. Third, this perspective enables deeper decoding of visual messages beyond material description and establishes a theoretical foundation for further dissertation research on the communicative autonomy of film design. Ultimately, the study expands art history's framework for understanding the cognitive potential of scenography and visual communication.

KEYWORDS: spatial-objective environment, cognitive impact, communicative phenomenon, Kazakhstan, visual modelling, film design.

How to cite: Rakhimova, M. (2026). Contemporary Kazakh Cinema: Semiotic Analysis of the Spatial-Objective Environment. *International Multidisciplinary Conference on Innovation, Technology and Sustainability*. Futurity Research Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18995461>

Introduction

The contemporary state of cinema is characterized by the increasing complexity of visual systems, where the design of the spatial and objective environment ceases to play the role of a passive background. The core problem of this study stems from a contradiction within national art criticism: while visual technologies and screen aesthetics have advanced rapidly, theoretical analysis of scenography remains largely restricted to descriptive approaches. The relevance of this work is dictated by the need to recognize environmental design as an autonomous communicative phenomenon capable of exerting a direct cognitive impact on the audience. The proposed research perspective allows us to consider artistic space not as a sum of objects, but as a tool for projecting meanings, which is becoming critically important in the context of the dominance of media reality and the transformation of cultural paradigms.

A discussion of the results of previously published studies (Amirbekova, 2025⁶; Abikeyeva, 2022; Abazov, 2021; Abazov, 2015) allows us to conclude that traditionally, scholars' attention has focused on the historical and ethnographic aspects or the genre specificity of the frame. However, in light of new identity and cultural transformations, a scientific lacuna arises: the mechanisms by which the "thing world" of the frame constructs sociocultural codes remain insufficiently developed.

Within the semiotic tradition, screen space is viewed as a text possessing a complex system of signs and semantic correlations (Wantoro, 2018). Contemporary film theory also emphasises the role of the visual organisation of the frame in shaping viewer perception and cognitive attitudes (Kılıçaslan, M., & Türkmen, A., 2024). According to the concept of the social production of space (De Rosa, M., 2012), space is not neutral—it is constructed and simultaneously constructs social reality. The integration of these approaches into the analysis of contemporary Kazakhstani cinema defines the novelty of the proposed perspective.

Thus, the shift from description to analysis of the communicative function of the spatial-objective environment allows us to identify the mechanisms by which a film's visual structure influences meaning-making and cognitive perception.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to theoretically substantiate the design of spatial and objective environments in cinema as a communicative tool with cognitive potential for shaping and transmitting sociocultural codes. The methodological basis of the study was formed by elements of a qualitative analysis of visual material. A preliminary analytical selection and analysis of 15 feature films from Kazakhstan (2021–2025) was conducted based on the criteria of visual dominance of the environment, professional recognition, and genre diversity.

Additionally, a focus group discussion (8 participants) was used to identify viewers' perceptions of the spatial organisation of the frame and its influence on value systems.

Research Results

The theoretical analysis conducted within this phase of the study allows us to move beyond the traditional descriptive approach to scenography and examine it through the lens of cognitive impact. Within the semiotic tradition, screen space is interpreted as a system of signs that forms a specific structure of perception of historical reality (Özdemir, 2026). Contemporary studies of film language also emphasise the role of the visual organisation of the frame in guiding viewer attention and interpretation (Goharipour, 2019).

Space in this context is not neutral – it functions as a socially and culturally determined structure that participates in the construction of identity discourses.

A preliminary analysis of the selected sample of films allows us to hypothesise that in contemporary Kazakhstani cinema, the spatial-objective environment is increasingly becoming an active mediator of meaning. In some original works (for example, films by A. Erzhhanov and E. Baigazin), the environment functions not as an illustration, but as a tool for artistically modelling reality.

The results of the focus group discussion confirm that viewers perceive the visual organisation of space as a significant factor influencing emotional and value attitudes, which requires further in-depth research. A statistical interpretation of the frequency of use of visual tools in the study sample is presented in [Table 1].

Table 1

Preliminary directions for the transformation of the spatial-subject environment (based on the results of the pilot analysis)

Analytical factors	Visual techniques (trends)	Degree of manifestation (according to observations of the pilot analysis)	Cognitive goal of communication
Shift in cultural paradigms	Deconstruction of familiar interior codes	A pronounced tendency	Rethinking cultural values
Change of perception	Use of "sterile" or abstract spaces	A steady trend	Creating distance and focus on meanings
Identity discourses	Symbolism of everyday objects-markers	Episodic manifestation	Broadcasting social and personal meanings
The influence of media reality	Hyperrealism and digital aesthetics of the environment	Isolated cases	Constructing a new visual norm

Source: this original table was compiled by the author based on an analysis of a sample of 15 films (2021-2025).

The data in [Table 1] suggest that one of the most prominent areas of transformation of the spatial-objective environment is the shift in cultural paradigms. The pilot study revealed a tendency toward the activation of the objective world as a meaning-forming element of the film's visual structure.

In the semiotic tradition, the objective environment is viewed as a significant component of on-screen text, shaping a system of associations and interpretive strategies (Swarnakar, 2025). From the perspective of film language theory, the visual organisation of the frame is capable of controlling attention and directing perceptual processes. In this context, it can be hypothesised that scenography is gradually ceasing to serve a purely background function and is beginning to act as an active mediator of cultural meanings.

Thus, the preliminary results of the pilot analysis suggest that environmental design in contemporary Kazakhstani cinema encrypts sociocultural, spatial, and historical codes as tools for formation and transmission, requiring further empirical verification and offering new perspectives for cinematic semiotics and cultural studies.

Conclusions

Summarising the study, it can be noted that the proposed approach to examining the spatial-objective environment as a communicative phenomenon expands the analytical capabilities of the art historical approach to cinema. Observations obtained during the pilot phase suggest that scenography in contemporary cinema demonstrates a tendency toward a stronger meaning-making function.

A preliminary analysis of 15 Kazakhstani films (2021–2025), supported by focus group discussion, reveals the growing importance of the visual environment in shaping audience interpretations. As shown in Table 1, the data highlight a dominant deconstruction of various interior codes within the material, aligning closely with the proposed hypothesis.

However, this study is still in its early stages and requires an expanded empirical base. Prospects for future work include a more in-depth verification of the identified patterns and a clarification of the mechanisms of the cognitive impact of spatial design within the framework of a master's thesis.

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