I

Metz and the Tradition of Film Theory
2. Two Ways of Thinking

Raymond Bellour

Tröhler, Margrit and Guido Kirsten (eds.), Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema. Film Semiology and Beyond. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

DOI: 10.5117/9789089648921/CH02

Abstract
How the most intimate friendship there could be was strengthened by the close brush between two ways of thinking as alien to each other as possible: between an experience of the real that ultimately presupposed the impossibility of any theory attempting to account for it, and the inherent logic of a system so oriented as to never encounter that real – a real that nevertheless engendered a passion. For in the end, that system's target was itself.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, friendship, epistemology, film analysis, methodology

I thank Margrit Tröhler most warmly for inviting me to this conference dedicated to Christian Metz, and for asking me to be the first speaker. I can’t help remembering that I had the pleasure, 24 years ago already, of opening the first major conference in Christian's honour, organized by Michel Marie at Cerisy-la-Salle, and that Christian attended it from beginning to end, responding at length to everyone with the patience, the attention, and the respect for others that were among his best qualities, making those ten days as warm and friendly as they were rich in ideas and viewpoints.

So it’s not easy finding myself here opening this conference in the presence of Christian’s son, Michaël, and his companion, Michèle; I have not seen them that often since his death. The emotion and the grief, which remains deep, are compounded by the difficulty of not repeating what both Christian and I felt I had really succeeded in expressing at Cerisy: both the uniqueness of his work, so fundamental in its domain, and the effect that that same uniqueness could have on others, particularly me, since one always speaks best about what one knows most intimately.

In the wake of the long interview we had at the end of the 1960s on his work,² Christian had become, rather quickly, one of my closest friends – a friendship in which our respective fields of research obviously played a part. But they did not play the largest part: it was life in general, as it were, that concerned us the most – life in all its aspects, its triviality, its surprises, to which friendship brought its questions and its unexpected answers. This is probably what made our friendship so precious.

Above all, something unusual happened at that time, through the friendship that then connected us, together and separately, to Thierry Kuntzel: the formation of a kind of small-scale community, between beings as different from each other as you could imagine. The age differences between us were of a half-generation, a little less than ten years: differences that were acknowledged but that did not define us. There were also differences in temperament – Christian's willfully obsessive and secret side, the strange character of the artist that Thierry would soon become, and the slightly scatterbrained, jack-of-all-trades nature I had at the time (signing a book once, Christian called me ‘my dear pensive ludio’³). The quality of a feeling is always hard to describe: I'd say that by way of those different temperaments, and through each of our inevitable problems – to a large extent because of them – the three of us shared an unreserved friendship, based on mutual aid, and most importantly free of any kind of competitiveness in our development of the thoughts on cinema that brought us so close together. For our benefit, I would willingly revise Montaigne's comment, which had always seemed so beautiful to me, on his extraordinary friendship with La Boétie: ‘Because it was them, because it was me.’ As far as our work went, the issue of Communications entitled Psychanalyse et cinéma that we jointly edited and that the three of us wrote for the most part was the most obvious social and professional expression of this congenial, trusting relationship.⁴

For Christian, this was the occasion of his second founding gesture, for which he had been long preparing: after linguistics, psychoanalysis, in order to shed light on cinema from a new exterior. In my talk at Cerisy, I had

---

⁴ Communications, 23 (Psychanalyse et cinéma, eds. by Raymond Bellour, Thierry Kuntzel and Christian Metz, 1975).
described this all-embracing gesture with the words ‘The cinema and...’ to try and mark the special place Christian Metz held in the area of film study where he appeared, commensurate with this same externalizing gesture, as one of those founders of discursive practice whose portrait Michel Foucault had rendered in one of his most penetrating essays, ‘What Is an Author?’

I’ll take a moment to recall what Foucault wrote, for I think it has become even more essential today. Returning to my 1990 text, where I quote him extensively: ‘The distinctive contribution of these authors [these initiators of discursive practices] is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts. [...] They established [an] endless possibility of discourse.’ In this, unlike the novelist who makes subsequent analogies possible, the founders of discursive practice (Marx and Freud, for example, ‘the first and the most important’) ‘not only made possible a certain number of analogies [...], but, as importantly, they also made possible a certain number of differences’. On the other hand, in contrast to the initiation of a science, or a scientific practice, which ‘can always be rechanneled through the machinery of the transformations it has instituted [...], the initiation of a discursive practice is heterogeneous to its ulterior transformations’. It remains in the background, or hangs above. This is why, adds Foucault, we can ‘return’ to these heroes of a new kind (in this way opposing ‘return’ to ‘rediscover’ or ‘reactivate’); ‘the barrier imposed by omission’ is incorporated into their works:

[T]he act of initiation is such, in its essence, that it is inevitably subjected to its own distortions; that which displays this act and derives from it is, at the same time, the root of its divergences and travesties. This nonaccidental omission must be regulated by precise operations that can be situated, analysed, and reduced in a return to the act of initiation. The barrier imposed by omission was not added from the outside; it arises from the discursive practice in question, which gives it its law. Both the cause of the barrier and the means for its removal, this omission – also responsible for the obstacles that prevent returning to the act of initiation – can only be resolved by a return.

As a result, in the final characteristic that Foucault ascribes to these discursive practices, these returns ‘tend to reinforce the enigmatic link between an author and his works. A text has an inaugurative value precisely because it is the work of a particular author, and our returns are conditioned by this knowledge’.

Christian Metz’s particular inaugurative force was then to encourage thinking on cinema to build itself through a systematic confrontation with disciplines that are inherently external to it. This is what I condensed into the phrase ‘The cinema and...’. The idea was to give a visible, fully recognizable reality to a project that was both scattered and vast, but prophetic, delineated in France by the *Revue internationale de filmologie*, with its references to psychology, sociology, biology, and aesthetics. Published from 1947 to 1962, its final issue came two years before Christian’s first article, ‘Cinema: Language or Language System?’ (Since then, mostly as a result of the new pathways opened by the cognitive and neurosciences, the importance of this whole movement, all too neglected, has been reasserted.)

Without getting into the subtle nuances of Foucault’s text, those words, omission and return, are ones to which we can only be immediately sensitive. After having been celebrated up until the mid-1990s as a sort of pope of film semiotics, of which he was historically the founder – an image whose excessiveness amused him, while he sensed the threat it posed and all the risks for backlash that it implied – Christian Metz has over time been quite forgotten. He had a premonition that this would happen, and it troubled him, with that lucidity of his that allowed him to understand so well the periods of enthusiasm, then of indifference, that comprise the history of thought, with its share of fashion as well. I remember that after I’d given him a text (something I would do from time to time), one with which I’d been having trouble, he’d told me how appreciative he was that I could think highly of both his work and Deleuze’s, if it’s true that we can symbolically date the beginning of the indifference shown toward semiology with the publication of Deleuze’s two seminal books on cinema, which explicitly reject French semiology. In this respect, we can only point out that although Deleuze did not carry out on a philosophical basis a transfer of notions like the one that Metz accomplished on a linguistic or psychoanalytical basis, his endeavor still comes under the heading of ‘the cinema and...’ that Metz had first called for.

So much for omission. What of return? Its essence is to be improbable because we cannot anticipate what has not yet occurred. Perhaps this conference will become one of its early traces – it is necessarily too soon to say. We can only imagine, for example, that the day, if that day ever comes, when the cognitive sciences demonstrate a capacity to orient their knowledge on cinema without the reductionism and the ignorance that they have generally demonstrated about it up to this point, they may perhaps find in some of the more demanding postulates of film semiotics (I’m thinking
particularly of the constantly refined distinctions in *Language and Cinema*\(^6\) an incentive that leads them to develop structured arguments – that would still seem improbable today – on what’s going on inside the mind of the spectator of the film-object in a cinema context.

More modestly, the return could also be the support for a small step forward found in each person’s work in this area, with the guarantee that every proposition in Metz’s writings is substantiated with enough care that you can be sure it will inspire you, even if this means taking a back road to it. This was the case for me and for the propositions I had made in *Le Corps du cinéma* on an analogy between the *dispositifs*\(^7\) of cinema and hypnosis.\(^8\) In ‘The Fiction Film and its Spectator’,\(^9\) where Christian very carefully developed the analogy between film and dreams, I found all the distinctions I needed to build a second analogy that seemed to me to be more precise and more inclusive, thereby benefiting from the first analogy without, however, repudiating it, as I’ve always found it more useful, both in intellectual life and life in general, to add rather than oppose or subtract. On a greater scale, the inspiration I got from Daniel Stern’s views on early childhood in order to work out the reality-fiction of a body in cinema owes a lot, as different as it tries to be, to the ‘cinema and psychoanalysis’ effect so forcefully presented in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’.\(^10\)

Before I get to what concerned me most when I thought back on Christian and his work, I’d like to say one more thing in passing on the status of science that this work gave itself, more or less – which could also have an impact on omissions and returns. Christian was wary of the word ‘science’, of its harmful psychic effects, while recognizing in semiotics a sort of aspiration towards a model for which linguistics was the ideal. Everyone knows about the extreme seriousness Christian applied

---


to that end; one could almost speak of his positivism. But it was a special kind of positivism that found its most precise formulation in a phrase by Roland Barthes, when he saw in Metz ‘the idea's insistence that it be expressed completely’. Barthes added: ‘[A] radical demand for precision and clarity generates a free, somehow dreamy tone, a tone I should say sounds almost drugged [...]: here an enraged exactitude prevails.’ This rage is indeed what makes Metz’s work so eminently personal, with such a recognizable style, through the objectivism that pervades it throughout and beyond. The word ‘drugged’ is probably the most exact, for it implies a commensurability between the subject and itself, an impossibility of getting out from within oneself, so strange in someone so profoundly open to otherness: I’d always been convinced that he would have made an outstanding psychoanalyst.

By comparison and contrast, I think of Gérard Genette, who had been so close to Christian in their youth. Genette is one of the greatest inventors ever of categories and notions in the related areas of stylistics, rhetoric, and literary aesthetics: in a word, poetics. But through a kind of detachment, of internal irony, all these categories, which are moreover conceived in such a way as to not really fit in with each other, take as a result, more or less explicitly, a kind of fictional dimension that brings them just slightly in touch with Borges’ taxonomies, with which Foucault admitted his fascination in the preface to *The Order of Things*. This is also why, in eloquent retirement, Genette could produce entirely subjective books of such personal irony – *Bardadrac* and the two volumes that followed, all three of which were published in the ‘Fiction et Cie’ collection at Les Editions du Seuil rather than in their ‘Poétique’ collection. To say it another way, in these works science was explicitly put in perspective through humour and reverie. Nothing of the kind for Christian: he did not have that sudden burst of inventive retirement. I realize today that I don’t really know what he thought deep down about the more or less scientific aspect of his work. I only know that he often said that instead of being an intellectual, he would rather have been a florist or a gardener.

I now come to what most concerns me, which is the uncertain relationship, in my view, between the two large domains that Metz considered as both distinct and complementary in the undertaking of film semiotics: what we could call general theory, and ‘the textual analysis’ of films, in which he

---

saw ‘at least half of the work to be done in film semiotics’. This was what he insistently brought to the fore in *Language and Cinema* by means of the two categories of ‘cinematographic language’ and ‘filmic writing’. This necessarily brings me personally into the midst of this opposition, where I – along with many others, though perhaps more clearly than some – represented the second category. I won’t repeat what I’ve already discussed, at length, regarding the issue of alternation (especially since André Gaudreault has made it his specialty) or the relationship between words and images, so that I may concentrate on this supposedly permeable divide between film theory and film analysis.

What surprises me first of all is the hesitancy that Christian maintained in his books, texts, or interviews regarding his personal relationship to film analysis. I will just remind you, for its symptomatic value, of the episode (to which I already alluded in the introduction to my book *The Analysis of Film*) that brought us together, at the end of the 1960s, on the project of a joint analysis of a film excerpt. It involved the moment in Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* (USA 1941), of which we managed to find a print, where Joan Fontaine and Cary Grant meet on a train. We watched the excerpt three times in a row on the editing table, but nothing came out of it. No desire for anything. In my case, was it my inhibition when faced with the specific act of breaking the film down, of stopping it, an inhibition that I was to dispel shortly afterward? In Christian’s – at least the way I imagined it – was it a much greater resistance? Or was it the very fact that, as close as we were then becoming, we were entering an experience together, insufficiently aware that it concerned desire at its most intimate?

If I am not mistaken, out of all of his writings Christian carried out just three analyses or para-analyses of films: three analyses based on one code, but using quite different modes and extensions. First, in 1966, came his relatively classical approach, though carried out with his usual scrupulousness, to the *mise en abyme* structure of Fellini’s *8½* (I/F 1963): a stylistic choice in the screenplay that gives its form to the whole of the film. Then, just afterwards in 1967, he wrote his famous commented breakdown of the ‘autonomous segments’ of Jacques Rozier’s *Adieu Philippine* (F/I 1962).

This was an attempt to implement an example of the *grande syntagmatique*

of narrative film, whose first version had appeared a year before. It came with all the familiar problems of the partial discrepancy between an actual film and the code supposed to manifest itself within it, ultimately clarified through a substantial critical apparatus: footnotes designed to dispel the easy answers, to rule out any ambiguity, any more or less obvious contradiction. What’s strange when one thinks about it is to have chosen a film from 1962, in other words a modern film from the Nouvelle Vague, when the grande syntagmatique is increasingly seen as dealing strictly with classical narrative cinema (I won’t go into the details). The great love Christian had for this film – so close to his idea of life, to his love of the Riviera and of women – was probably behind this choice, one however which led to a greater difficulty in application (and in any case, the contingent classicism of the film is not sufficient to reduce this difficulty, as I demonstrated in detail in my study of Minnelli’s *Gigi* [USA 1958], ‘To Segment/To Analyze’15). Finally, Christian’s third analysis, in *Language and Cinema*, concerns the alternating structure throughout Griffith’s *Intolerance* (USA 1916), the main example in the section ‘Cinematic and extra-cinematic: from duality to mixture’16.

Then come the examples – just to give a quick, certainly non-exhaustive overview that gathers enough evidence to make the case – of what we could call Christian Metz’s flirtation with the idea of the textual analysis of films. Most of them are to be found in Marc Vernet and Daniel Percheron’s fine interview with him, ‘Sur mon travail’. In this interview, held when he was working on *The Imaginary Signifier*, Metz started by recognizing he had ‘an object relationship with theoretical discourse as such’. He then put it more simply: ‘What grounds theory is a taste for theory.’17 He admitted that he had difficulty getting two ‘series’ (film watching and linguistics) to join together within him, adding: ‘and that’s why, I think, that until now I’ve analyzed relatively few films’.18 But things get more complicated in the part of the interview entitled ‘Fear and Desire of Textual Analysis’.19 He recognizes his ‘resistances’ and his desire ‘to overcome them’. He reveals his ‘intention to start by analyzing a short film’ because ‘with a short film, you can have a complete textual system, but one which is more quickly containable in terms of the quantity of elements and the relationships

---

17 Metz, ‘Sur mon travail’, p. 166.
18 Ibid., p. 174.
19 Ibid., pp. 174-76 (for all the quotes preceding the following note).
between them’. He adds: ‘Then I’d like to analyze some of the films I loved the most when I was young, particularly Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* [USA 1941]: I’d want to analyze it image by image. That would probably take a book to do, not an article.’ He seems to contradict himself a little when at the end he declares that he doesn’t have ‘the desire to bring out all the codes in a film’, claiming that such ‘exhaustiveness […] is not part of the semiotic program’. But the desire to analyze a short film seemed to imply just that, as did the wish to reconnect with *Citizen Kane* ‘image by image’. Moreover, the very characterization of the textual system in *Language and Cinema* is that ‘[i]deally, the final construction of the analyst (the singular system of the film) should account for all traits of any importance which appear in that film’. In short, it just goes to show that the ‘resistance […] summoned up by the text as such’ (the last words in the section ‘Fear and Desire of Textual Analysis’) won out, and that in the end Metz never undertook a full analysis as such of either a short or a feature film.

This is also why I’ve always wondered about the words with which Christian, in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, had generously described my analysis of *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1959) in our issue of *Communications* – I don’t think I’d ever asked him what they ultimately meant. By way of my text, he wrote, thanks to the mapping of a sequence analyzed in detail to the narrative as a whole, ‘we are really getting close to the order of the textual system as I understand it’. As a reminder, I’ll point out that this text, without counting the pictures and diagrams, is at least 200 standard pages long; so even by coming close to really existing, something like an infinite realm is opened, the realm of the total textual system, with the terror that that can arouse. An assertion of Christian’s that rings true comes to mind, one that only reinforces that terror. In one of his essays he pointed out that the elements of the shot, as opposed to the discrete elements of language, ‘are indefinite in number and undefined in nature’, and whereas ‘[o]ne can decompose a shot, […] one cannot reduce it’.

This is tantamount to saying that we are perhaps confronted with an unbridgeable chasm between film analysis and film theory as such, even

23 A standard page or author’s page (*un feuillet calibré* in French) is typically taken to be 1500 characters without spaces [translator’s note].
though each time an analysis is made, it becomes part of that same theory. At the same time, however, that analysis holds itself almost in reserve, on the sidelines, without ever finding itself absorbed or included within theory, or even really establishing a point of connection with it. In reality, theory and analysis do not operate on the same level: the first is carried along by its desire for ideas while the second is inspired by its desire for objects, and their logics could never correspond to each other, despite the links between them.

Actually, I can only see one developed example of an analysis that managed to occupy a truly mediate position between its very effectuation and the theorization that it made possible: Barthes' *S/Z* (1970), whose point-by-point development, commented along the way, allowed for a constant exchange between the signifier *stricto sensu* of the text, broken down into fragments, and the signifier as a general theoretical force, as a destiny offered to the literature of its time.25 Such an example, only a year before *Language and Cinema*, fires the imagination when we consider the abyss that it opened, in a sense, before any possible analysis of a film, well beyond the structural analysis of narratives to which Barthes had, some years earlier, offered an ‘Introduction’;26 *S/Z* gloriously signaled the counter-example to such analyses and, to some degree, their abandonment. At the same time, such a feat was possible only because this was literature: in this case, the transformation of one text into another.

I also think that it was this whirlwind of contentious issues that led me to abandon the adjective ‘structural’ in the title of my collection, *The Analysis of Film*. It would have made the title more distinguished, and it would have been expected, given that these analyses were indeed partly structural. But they weren’t exclusively structural, and that was the whole problem: letting the expressiveness associated with the films that made those analyses possible come through in their very organization, in how they unfolded. That expressiveness, the desire clinging to the ghost of films – a ghost yet alive – was what was behind the abandonment of an adjective that presupposed the effectiveness of an order as well as the stipulation of a method.

Fundamentally, I can’t see film analysis – as permeated with science, hypotheses, and theoretical viewpoints as it may or sometimes should be – as anything other than a mimetic activity, substituting its own narrative for


that of its object, while at the same time finding inspiration from that object (this of course also goes for the approach toward supposedly non-narrative films, where the material of the film comprises the narrative; in fact, they coincide with each other). As a result, the analysis separates itself from its object in the proportion necessary for its own invention, but without ever leading to the belief in an autonomy that would place it in another world.

The day – a turning point for me – when I encountered Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star, IND 1960) by Ritwik Ghatak, the great Indian director, I found the expression for such an operation. I developed a commentary on the film, from the first shot to the last in a way, but by selecting certain moments as I went along that could maintain a sense of proportion to the film’s consequently restructured totality. I called this text ‘The Film We Accompany’\(^{27}\) in order to underline the reality of this movement that remains – precisely in that separation that establishes itself between the film and the text that comments on it – a text whose consistency is to some degree an illusion. But that illusion is in my view essential, as if within the very time of the film that we would like to follow ‘image by image’, although that goes beyond reason and seems endless.

I will finish where I started: with friendship. I owe a great deal to Christian, without even speaking of what is not really expressible. At a time when I had entered into an academic career at the CNRS\(^ {28} \) without really thinking it through, Christian convinced me to submit a Doctorat d’Etat based on previous research, as was then possible in some fields considered as innovative, and as he himself had done. Without his backing and the unfailing support of Etienne Souriau, who allowed me to stay at the CNRS, that would have been impossible. Christian also persuaded me to compile in one volume my scattered essays of film analysis, convinced that without the ‘book effect’, they would not have the impact that he felt they deserved. Finally, he was for me an exceptional reader, one who was both inflexible and gentle. Gentle, because he had always made himself so available that I sometimes felt that I was taking advantage of him, but he made me feel like it was something natural and simple, in accordance with a pact of friendship as implicit as it was explicit. (Christian liked thoroughness; he is definitely the only person who has ever suggested to me that we spend an evening together working out the schedule that was needed to keep our


\(^{28}\) Centre national de la recherche scientifique, The French National Center for Scientific Research [translator’s note].
friendship going,) He was also an inflexible reader, because in the expression of agreement as well as the formulation of a criticism, he demonstrated that ‘enraged exactitude’ that Barthes spoke of so well, which was his own way of confronting reality and protecting himself from it. Leafing through the letters of Christian that I still have – with the melancholy that you can imagine – in order to write this text, I came upon one that I had completely forgotten about: six pages covered with his large green handwriting, as he tried to work out the expression of a misgiving, just one, but one that he wanted to set forth at all costs, concerning ‘The Unattainable Text’, an article that I had written for the issue of *Ça Cinéma* dedicated to him.29 After several nuances following each other in quick succession, he finally wrote what follows – forgive me, this is somewhat long, but I thought it was worth it:

What your text lacks is a little dash of stupidity: that somewhat basic stupidity, somewhat “I’ll get to the heart of the matter”, that quality (or that flaw, ultimately it’s the same thing) that alone adds to the truly analytical utterance a kind of raw thrust that makes it possible to win over outside people, people who’d never thought about the problem, where it’s not a matter (at least on the first reading) of convincing them, enlightening them, but of winning them over, getting them to shift position. In short, what I mean is that you’re not dumb enough.

Two pages later came these ‘Practical conclusions’:

1) Given the place where this will be published, if I were you, I’d leave it as is without changing anything.
2) But: some day, on this same issue (because there’s a real idea there that’s really yours, and that’s new, especially concerning the question of the quotable) I’d (“I” = me, Christian; so make what you will of it) like you to write something different. Different yet saying the same thing, but saying it a little louder.

That is what’s called knowing how to read and knowing how to love.

To conclude, this time definitively, I have a hard time denying myself the pleasure of quoting from one of the ‘usual Metzian maniachemes’ – the expression is obviously his – with which he accompanied (the Internet

didn’t exist yet) a few lines thanking me for sending him my book *Mademoiselle Guillotine*, which dealt with Alexandre Dumas’s series of novels on the French Revolution, a book for which he had done so much under difficult circumstances and whose final metamorphosis delighted him: ‘Villers-Cotterêts is written with a circumflex on the last “e” since August 10, 1539, the date of Francis I’s ordinance that became law in that city and that, appropriately enough, called for the use of French instead of Latin in a whole series of circumstances.’

*Translated from French by Allyn Hardyck*

**About the author**


**About the translator**

*Allyn Hardyck* is a translator living in Paris. He earned a BA in film from the University of California, Berkeley, followed by two degrees in philosophy from the Université Paris 8. He works regularly with Raymond Bellour and has also translated texts by Michel Chion and Philippe Grandrieux. He is currently at work on a translation of François Bovier’s book on H.D. and the Pool Group.