Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

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3. Christian Metz and his Theoretical Legacy

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Abstract
This chapter is a synthesizing account of the conference that took place in Zurich in June 2013. The conference is briefly situated with respect to that of 1989 in Cerisy-la-Salle, which took place in the presence of Metz himself. The author then identifies three successive generations of scholars and highlights some of the Zurich conference’s core themes: research on the theories of enunciation; changes within the cinematic institution between the period of classic cinephilia, which was based on film viewing in the cinema, and the contemporary period, with its variety of modes of consuming moving images. These developments are tied back to Metz’s hypotheses proposed in The Imaginary Signifier, which contains a theory of the cinematic apparatus.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, Metz conference 1989, generations of scholars, enunciation theory, history of film theory, apparatus theory

It has been 24 years since the first colloquium devoted to Christian Metz at Cerisy-la-Salle, in Normandy, in June 1989. Thanks to Marc Vernet’s initiative, the conference proceedings, representing a generation of scholars, were promptly published the following April, under the title Christian Metz et la théorie du cinéma. Between that conference and the one in Zurich, we find an overlap of six speakers: Raymond Bellour, Roger Odin, Marc

1 Iris, 10 (special issue Christian Metz et la théorie du cinéma / Christian Metz and Film Theory, ed. by Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, 1990) [Conference proceedings from the 1989 Cerisy-la-Salle conference].
Vernet, Francesco Casetti, André Gaudreault, and myself. No longer living are Christian Metz, who died tragically in September 1993, Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, Jean-Louis Leutrat, and Guy Gauthier. I organized the 1989 colloquium with the active collaboration of Metz himself; he played a principal role in selecting the invited speakers, and even had a say in who was to attend. A quarter of a century later, I thank Margrit Tröhler, Julia Zutavern, Guido Kirsten, and the University of Zurich for having organized this second international colloquium and for having invited me. Admittedly, the organization of a ten-day symposium differs from a three-day university colloquium. For the latter, the papers have been shorter, idem the exchanges with the audience. But the number of speakers has been relatively constant: nineteen at Cerisy and seventeen in Zurich. Meanwhile, the participation of foreign scholars demonstrates the French theoretician’s renown; today he is perhaps more widely celebrated abroad than at home. In 1989, besides France, the speakers invited by Metz came from Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Canada, America, Uruguay, Japan, and China. He actively desired this global participation in the conference, including representatives from the Far East (China and Japan) and from Latin America, where he often traveled. The international scope of the Swiss conference in 2013, on the other hand, was more circumscribed: in addition to France and Switzerland, the contributors came from the Netherlands, Canada, and the United States. It’s worth noting that the North American delegation was the strongest, providing undeniable proof of the vitality of theoretical studies of film there. It is also proof of Metz’s unabated fame on the other side of the Atlantic, no doubt extended and reinforced by the controversies that characterize the intellectual climate of that great continent. Scholars from the most prestigious American universities were on hand: New York University, Harvard, Yale, Berkeley, Brown, and Columbia, as well as from the Canadian universities of Montreal and Concordia. Their attendance confirms both the major role played by translations in discussions on semiology and film semiotics and the enthusiasm for theoretical approaches in Anglo-Saxon countries more generally.

Still, we shouldn’t draw any hasty conclusions about such national participation. Absent in Zurich were representatives from Italy, Spain, England, or Belgium, even though teaching and research focused on film theory are very active in all of those European countries. Undoubtedly, busy schedules prevented these colleagues from attending.

The three generations present at the Zurich conference assure the posterity of Metzian studies. There was the senior generation, who co-founded film theory at the end of the 1960s, including Raymond Bellour, Francesco
Casetti, and Roger Odin. There was the intermediary generation of theoreticians, many of whom attended Christian Metz’s seminar in the 1970s and went on to teach in university film departments. This includes Dana Polan, D.N. Rodowick, Frank Kessler, André Gaudreault, and the quintet from the journal *Iris*: Margrit Tröhler, Dominique Blüher, Claire Dupré-La-Tour, Anne Goliot-Lété, and Marie-Françoise Grange. Last but not least is the generation of young theorists who continue the Metzian legacy by prolonging it or challenging it. The dynamism of this group is demonstrated by the contributions of Guido Kirsten on the filmological heritage, Selim Krichane on the concept of code in semiotics, and Nico Baumbach on the relationship between the theories of Metz and Deleuze. Additionally, Julia Zutavern played a key role in the organization of the Zurich meeting.

One of the stated goals of the Zurich colloquium was to verify Metz’s place in the history of film theories today. This objective was definitely reached, since several speakers made it the principal subject of their talks. Raymond Bellour, for example, revisited in detail the relationship that has developed since the 1960s between a general film theory and a textual analysis of film, the first being represented by the Metzian approach and the second by that of Bellour himself. For D.N. Rodowick and Frank Kessler, Christian Metz literally invented film theory by establishing a theoretical attitude in this field. But both Rodowick and Kessler were quick to point out the contributions of earlier theoreticians – Rudolf Arnheim, Hugo Münsterberg, and Jean Leirens – whose writings Metz glossed in his writings. For Phil Rosen, the cardinal concept of the Metzian approach in its initial phase is that of ‘specificity’. What mattered was defining the specificity of film language and the modes of cinematic expression. Other contributors, like Selim Krichane, emphasized the strategic place of the notion of ‘code’, as described in Metz’s masterwork *Langage et cinéma* (1971). These concepts have allowed us to evaluate the strategy of the disciplinary transfers that Metz questions throughout *Le signifiant imaginaire* (1977), transfers mobilizing linguistics, rhetoric, and psychoanalysis. In this regard, despite the violent shocks of cognitivism and philosophical approaches largely hostile to the heritage of structural linguistics, the central position of Metzian theory within film theory remains secure. The phenomenon of fashion regularly modifies its centres of interest because that is its raison d’être.


Thus, structuralism is now out of date, as is film semiotics. More generally, theory itself is no longer popular. Theory has been replaced by various approaches, both subjective and personal, whose links to theory are more tenuous, peppered with references to new authors à la mode.

Discussions during the colloquium highlighted a paradigm change in the reference framework. The most radical change concerns what Metz called ‘the cinematic institution’, which has been altered over the last twenty years by the appearance of digital technology and the widespread diffusion of digital images on very different platforms. There has been an indisputable diminution of the heretofore dominant model, which was represented by the movie theatre and the screening of films therein. Throughout his writings, from the initial *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* I (1968) up until *Le signifiant imaginaire* (1977), Metz continued to examine the cinematic institution, for which he provided a definition and whose characteristics he enumerated, particularly regarding the dispositif or apparatus and the position of the spectator. Had he lived, he surely would have extended his investigations to include these spectacular transformations of the institutional model. Returning time and again to André Bazin’s fundamental question, *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* (What is Cinema?), Metz responded in lexical, grammatical, expressive, psychological, and sociological terms. Obviously, film is no longer what it was at the time of the theoretician’s death in the early 1990s. In this regard, current research is consistent with Metz’s examinations in *Le signifiant imaginaire* regarding the spectatorial apparatus and the institutional status of cinema vis-à-vis the screening of moving images. Examples include Raymond Bellour’s most recent book *La querelle des dispositifs*. Cinéma – installations, expositions, Jacques Aumont’s *Que reste-t-il du cinéma?*, André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion’s *La fin du cinéma?*, and Francesco Casetti’s current research on the post-cinematographic period ‘The Relocation of Cinema’. Today, screenings take place in the most diverse settings and depend upon increasingly personal and miniature formats, like cell phones.


What were the principal highlights of these three days of discussion? First, there has been a very noticeable renewed interest by scholars in the concept of *enunciation*, based on Metz’s last book *L’énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* (1991). At least three speakers – Dana Polan, Dominique Bluher, and Alain Boillat – used the Metzian line of questioning as a point of departure: ‘Who enunciates the film?’; ‘What is the source of the enunciation?’; ‘To whom is it addressed and in what form?’ All of these questions return to the initial question ‘What is cinema?’

A second field of reflection has to do with the genesis of Metzian thought. By analyzing issues of the *Revue internationale de filmologie* and Roland Barthes’ articles on film, Guido Kirsten carefully evaluated the complex connections between filmological research in the 1950s and the first semiotic research at the time of the *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* I (1968). Martin Lefebvre embarked on a particularly ambitious endeavor, studying the theoretician’s unpublished archives at the Library of the Cinémathèque française (BiFi). The Metz archives assemble a wealth of documents, book manuscripts, correspondence, and work notes. These notes comprise literally thousands of annotations on the films that Metz saw and commented upon almost daily. Both mnemonic aids and personal appreciations, they testify to a profound and constant cinephilia bordering on an obsession. They demonstrate that Metz’s theoretical drive was developed and nourished by a compulsive and passionate cinephilia. For several pages in *Le signifiant imaginaire* (1977), Metz put this drive under the microscope. Here are a few excerpts from the section entitled ‘Loving the Cinema’:

> What is it that I want to say about these writings whose approach is that of love? ... The effort towards knowing is necessarily sadistic insofar as it can only grasp its object against the grain, re-ascent the slopes of the institution (whereas the latter is designed for one to ‘follow’ them, to

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descend them), like the interpretation that goes back along the path of the dream work, acting by nature in the manner of a counter-current.

And the following, oft-cited lines have achieved a cult status:

To be a theoretician of the cinema, one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it: have loved it a lot and only have detached oneself from it by taking it up again from the other end, taking it as the target for the same scopic drive which had made one love it.10

The work of the scholarly team at Concordia University, coordinated by Martin Lefebvre, is surely going to modify the image we have of a fanatic scholar, obsessed with scientific rigor. In his essay on the relationship between semiotics and aesthetics, Lefebvre comments upon this view; Lefebvre’s contribution also usefully provided the occasion for the publication of a previously unknown Metz paper in the film history journal 1895.11

Metz is most certainly the founder of a research discipline called cinema and/or film studies. His articles between 1964 and 1968 enabled university research on film to become established by acquiring an institutional position through teaching and scholarship. It is no exaggeration to say that without Christian Metz’s work, the creation in 1983 of a research centre like IRCAV (Institut de recherche sur le cinéma et l’audiovisuel) at the University of Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle) and its equivalents at other French and foreign universities would have been impossible.

Two decades after his death, the Zurich colloquium also confirmed the broad influence of Metzian thinking and its effect on research on language, the semiotics of the image, gender studies, feminist studies, and a psychoanalytical approach toward film in general. Metzian hypotheses contributed to the birth of the textual analysis of film and have spread into vastly different analytic approaches to film. His hypotheses gave legitimacy to a detailed and erudite study of filmic works, which we can today undertake in the same manner and with the same rigour and insight

10 These excerpts are taken from Ben Brewster’s translation, ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, published in Screen, 16/2 (Summer 1975), 14-76 (pp. 25-26). The English translation antedates the 1977 publication of Le signifiant imaginaire, because Metz first published his research as an article ‘Le Signifiant imaginaire’ in Communications, 23 (1975). The fact that the translation appeared almost simultaneously with the original corroborates the intense interest in Metz’s work among Anglo-Saxon scholars at this early date [translator’s note.]

as the analysis of a literary work, a painting, or a musical composition. In the last two decades, there has been a significant increase in monographic series that tackle the analysis of individual films, either in the form of personal essays or in a more pedagogical form, whether in English, French, or Italian. Such works continue the post-war tradition of notes, proposed by the ciné-clubs and exemplified by André Bazin’s Le jour se lève (F 1939). From Bazin to Metz: twenty years later, applying his grande syntagmatique, Metz created a breakdown of Jacques Rozier’s Adieu Philippine (F/I 1962) that proved a turning point in how to study a film.

Metz’s legacy is particularly noticeable in recent years because of the proliferation of film studies around the world, just when there is a change of guard. One after another, the professors-scholars who worked with him or who knew him are retiring, replaced by a new generation who did not live through the Structuralist wave of the 1960s. This generational change is accompanied by a lively competition between disciplines, which safeguards research. Today, linguistics and structuralist thought are no longer obligatory references. They have been replaced by philosophy (under its cognitivist or Deleuzian aspect), aesthetics, art history, sociology, political history, the history of cultural productions, and cultural studies (popular in Anglo-Saxon countries) with its multiple ramifications.

Translated from French by Sally Shafto

About the author

Michel Marie is Professor Emeritus at the University of Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle), where he taught for nearly 40 years, beginning in 1973. In the early 1970s, he was a student of Christian Metz, who co-supervised his doctoral thesis with Marie-Claire Ropars. Together with other students of Metz’s seminar, Marie co-wrote several introductory handbooks of film studies, such as Lectures du film (1975), Esthétique du film (1983), and L’Analyse des films (1988, new edition in 2015), which have been translated into several languages. He has been editor of the ‘cinéma’ series at Editions Nathan,

13 Christian Metz in collaboration with M. Lacoste, ‘Syntagmatic Study of Jacques Rozier’s Film Adieu Philippine’ [1967], in Film Language, pp. 177-82.
and later at Armand Colin, since 1988. In 1989, he organized the conference ‘Christian Metz et la théorie du cinéma’ and co-edited the conference volume with Marc Vernet in 1990. Currently, Marie is researching the works of Pierre Perrault and co-editing the correspondence between Perrault, Louis Marcorelles, and Guy Gauthier for Presses de Rouen.

About the translator

Sally Shafto is a specialist on Godard and the author of *The Zanzibar Films and the Dandies of May 1968* (Editions Paris Expérimental, 2007). Her translations have appeared in *Cahiers du cinéma, Yale French Studies*, and other journals. From 2010 to 2015, she taught in Morocco, where she also actively followed Maghrebin and African film for two online film journals (*Senses of Cinema* and *Framework*). Currently, she is at work on the English-language edition of the writings of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub (forthcoming, Sequence Press, New York).