Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema: Film Semiology and Beyond.
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
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4. **Christian Metz for Today**

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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/CH04

**Abstract**

This chapter attempts to explain the currency of Christian Metz: his way of conceiving of research (particularly his mistrust of research directed from above, whether by an institution or by a thesis supervisor), his conception of the relation between theory and cinema (Metz approaches cinema from the outside, a well-forgotten paradigm now that everyone proposes their definition of cinema), and the objectives he set for research. At a time when mobile phones and computers more generally turn cinematic language into a language of everyday communication, it is more important than ever to examine film’s functioning within this new framework.

**Keywords:** film semiotics/film semiology, research ethics, epistemology, conception of cinema, portable media devices

Re-reading the interview between Christian Metz, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet in the proceedings of the Cerisy colloquium *Christian Metz et la théorie du cinéma*, I was struck by something in the final section, entitled ‘For Roland Barthes’. Here, Metz declares, ‘Roland Barthes was the only true master I ever had.’ Instantly, I became aware of an obvious fact: ‘Christian Metz was the only true master I ever had.’

Until that moment I had barely thought of Christian Metz in these terms. When I spoke of Christian, it was as a friend who had greatly influenced me in my research. However, I have many other, closer friends than Christian Metz (even though, at my time of life, a certain number of them disappear with each passing year), and I have been influenced by many people other

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than Metz. For example, I owe my passion for scholarly research to Jean Bruneau (a specialist in comparative literature and a Flaubert expert), with whom I did my DESS in comparative literature on George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* at Lyon. And I also owe much to A.J. Greimas, with whom I completed a 3rd cycle thesis on *Joan of Arc in Primary School Textbooks*, and whose theoretical model I still find convincing in a lot of ways. And to Sol Worth, whom I met only once, I owe the starting point of my semio-pragmatic model as a model of non-communication. So I have other friends, and other people have influenced me, but I am now convinced that what is particular about my relationship with Christian Metz is that he was ‘the only true master I ever had’.

To describe this relationship, I could repeat almost verbatim what Metz says about his relationship with Roland Barthes: ‘having had a master’ like that involves ‘something else’ besides influence, ‘something that no book can convey’, ‘a closeness in ways of doing things’, the transmission of a ‘practical philosophy’ more than an education, a ‘tone’, ‘a general attitude’; above all, the transmission of ‘a kind of ethics’. It is this transmission of ‘a kind of ethics’ that is so important. It ‘constantly inspired me’ or ‘I at least constantly aspired to it’ (I’m quoting Metz on Barthes again), in particular for the entire twenty years that I headed (rather than directed) the Institut de Recherche sur le cinéma et l’audiovisuel at the University of Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle). In this article it is my aim to present some positions (or propositions) of Christian Metz that seem to me to be particularly worth recalling today.

**Metz’s Position on Research**

In an interview with Daniel Percheron and Marc Vernet, published in the magazine *Ça cinéma*, Metz points out the dangers of an ill-conceived research strategy:

> The majority of organised efforts to do research have the principal outcome, if not the unconscious goal, of making all research very difficult due to the weight of their own bureaucracy, their latent authoritarianism,
due to the time and energy wasted at meetings, writing up reports, and so on.\textsuperscript{5}

And:

We spend hours relating pieces of research to one another, their main point in common being that they have none. Sometimes it takes a long time to conclude that none will ever exist. And at the same time, we will notice that every one of these participants has carried out some work, or written something, which he has not really spoken about at meetings. But it was something that he truly wanted to do, and which he all of a sudden has gone to the trouble of doing.\textsuperscript{6}

I am convinced that many of my colleagues will identify with these descriptions, all the more so because, since Metz’s day, the situation, far from improving, has become considerably worse, what with the top-down management and organisation of research; encouragement to bring together research teams with different histories, experiences, and ways of working that create disparate, awkward and unendurable partnerships; the necessity of registering with (European or international) ‘programmes’ made up of enormous ‘machines’ that are very difficult to manage in a productive manner; the multiplication of reports and evaluation procedures, etc. Of course, one must respond to these demands, otherwise one cannot take advantage of the means to make a research team function, but this must be done so it does not hinder research. This is hard to do and takes up a large amount of energy. Metz’s solution was succinct: ‘Research needs space to breathe’ (the emphasis is mine) because ‘the real motivations of scientific work, as with any kind of activity, are instinctual, because researchers are human beings’.\textsuperscript{7} In concrete terms, it is about creating not a ‘scientific space’ (this can only come afterwards), but first of all a space to breathe, something which is very rare (it is easier to research if you can breathe): it is not enough to create research \textit{ex nihilo}, but such a space at least makes it possible not to kill research at an embryonic stage when, in a group, a real spirit of research is being established.


Metz goes on to say:

the ‘policy’ that I am thinking of consists of a small number of elements, but attention is rarely paid to these few elements and they are not easily realized. A tone, a general attitude, that consists of various minimal acts of approaching (which, however, have to be quite finely tuned) and also withholding, [...] being ready to talk to people (and, above all, to listen to them), not to let your own problems displace theirs, to let them speak.

Metz means to create as relaxed a relationship as possible among colleagues, which is, he rightly adds, ‘something rare, because intellectuals are no more intelligent than other people, and they’re generally more uptight’.8

The current policy of putting universities in competition with one another and of making teams within a university – as well as people within teams – compete with each other makes it even more difficult to achieve this kind of breathing space. In a world where everything is done to encourage individuals to prevail over one another, where structures foster hierarchies, and where the tendency is to give more power to those in administrative positions (in the university, in a department, in a team), thus multiplying the number of ‘little bosses’, Metz is an example of a researcher who did everything not to put himself ‘in the position of boss’,9 even to the point that he refused to edit a journal.10 Metz was particularly reluctant when it came to the idea of a school (‘the more a school is informal and dilute, the more real and vibrant it is; which is to say, this would not be a school’),11 as seen in his determined refusal to found one.12 This was one of his major points of disagreement with Greimas and with what some people called the Paris School (Ecole de Paris), which is the title of an edited volume that came out in 1982.13 Metz denounced what he called ‘the non-stop, stupid psychodrama of memberships and affiliations’14 as well as the ‘posture of disciple, which calls forth a paternalistic image’:15 ‘I like neither the term

8 Vernet and Percheron, ‘Entretien’, pp. 44-45 (source for all cited texts since previous footnote marker; emphasis in original).
10 ‘I have never wanted [...] personally to edit a journal, as it would straightaway put me in the position of boss.’ Marie and Vernet, ‘Entretien’, p. 280.
12 ‘I have never wanted to found a school.’ Marie and Vernet, ‘Entretien’, p. 280.
14 Vernet and Percheron, ‘Entretien’, p. 47.
15 Ibid., p. 45.
nor the idea of “disciple”: they diminish the disciple and are burdensome for the “master”.”

He expressed equally serious reservations in relation to the status of a thesis ‘supervisor’ (the quotation marks are his): “Institutionally, I find myself obliged to “supervise” theses [...] “Supervise” is an absurd term, as the job is to discuss matters with candidates, if need be to advise them on what to read,” and above all to allow each one to choose his or her area of research in genuine freedom: “There is one very important thing in research, something very simple, and perhaps for that reason frequently forgotten: everybody must study what they want to study.” Metz never tired of repeating that research is driven by desire, and there is nothing worse than stymied desire. The main task of the thesis ‘supervisor’ is to free up this desire. “The best thing that any of us can do for the “research community”, such as it exists at all, is to find our own path and our own voice.”

More broadly, Metz was always concerned with avoiding any disciplinary imperialism: “Cinema is just one object of study among many others, semiotics is only one way of approaching it, and I myself am only one of several semioticians of cinema.” In his interview at the Cerisy conference, he returned to the subject with genuine feeling:

I am not the head of a school or the ‘Pope of Audiovisual Studies’! This idiotic notion that is sometimes used to describe me is not based on reading my work or on knowing what I do. On the contrary, I am very mistrustful of imperialist forms of semiotics ... for me, semiotics must remain one approach among others that is well suited for doing certain things, but not everything.”

With Metz, we are a long way from the gibes, snide remarks, and broadsides with which rival researchers attack each other, particularly (but not only) in America. Metz truly believed in Barthes’ vision of theories as ‘different languages that are more or less apt in any given case to discuss this or that object’, and he demonstrated this by example. He gently mocked the psychodramas that flare up in research communities, describing certain theorists who had ‘first “fought” the battle of classical semiotics, then

16 Marie and Vernet, ‘Entretien’, p. 280.
17 Vernet and Percheron, ‘Entretien’, p. 28.
18 Ibid., p. 20.
19 Ibid., p. 28.
20 Ibid., p. 48.
22 Ibid., p. 296.
the battle of sign-analysis, and today the battles of Deleuze-Guattari and Lyotard, in every case with the same enthusiasm in a torrid atmosphere of apocalyptic interrogation,23 while for him, moving from semiology to psychoanalysis seemed natural:

Those who look superficially or who share the ritual eagerness to detect ‘changes’ as often as possible will perhaps think that I have abandoned certain positions or turned away from them when in fact, more simply – less simply, of course – I am giving in to the temptation (the attempt) to drive a little deeper into the very procedures of knowledge.24

This non-hostile relationship with other fields and disciplines remains, despite everything that we hear about inter- or multi-disciplinarity, the thing that is least widely shared in the world of research today. But there is more. Metz was clearly concerned about ‘integration’. This is a term I have taken from Laurent Jullier: ‘I have come to realise, after fifteen years of reading books of film theory, that researchers rarely have the reflex to integrate in the way that we see in the hard sciences. I have two meanings of “integration” in mind; the researcher integrates his or her work into what already exists, and makes it available to be integrated by others.25 Metz said as much himself: ‘[M]ethods are things that cannot be exchanged, [...] but information and understanding, morsels of acquired knowledge, can and must circulate.26 All we have to do is re-read Metz’s work to see the care that he took to demonstrate what previous analyses had achieved (classical film theory, filmology). He always sought to point out his connections, in particular to phenomenology,27 to open up to other approaches (theories of writing in the final chapter of Language and Cinema, ethnography, cultural and social analysis, the analysis of ideology at the end of ‘The

Fiction Film and its Spectator',\textsuperscript{28} pedagogy\textsuperscript{29}). He drew comparisons (with the analysis of literature, theatre, and music), or suggested other possible kinds of analysis, particularly for other cinematic contexts (Africa, Egypt, etc.). Metz’s studies are anything but self-enclosed texts. Rather, they build bridges of understanding and open up perspectives. If Christian Metz’s reflections on the work of research seem still relevant to me today, the same can be said for his position on the relations between theory and cinema.

**Metz on the Connections between Theory and Cinema**

There is a well-known phrase by Metz that, in a certain way, sums up the essence of what he has to say to us: ‘Without a machine, we can be sure in advance of seeing nothing.’\textsuperscript{30} Obviously, he means without a theory machine. At the end of my paper at the colloquium at Cerisy,\textsuperscript{31} I suggested that these words be inscribed in gold everywhere in universities where cinema is taught. And now they seem more necessary to me than ever, and I am not alone in this. In the conclusion of his recent book, *L’invention du concept du montage*, Dominique Chateau deplores the ‘current tendency’ to ‘neglect’ the ‘box of tools’ (‘The analyst needs a box of tools’) and insists on the ‘necessity of using a method of analysis or of creating one’\textsuperscript{32} I might also add here what I said in 2007 in the introduction to an issue of the journal *Cinémas*: ‘Theory is finally in crisis’:

> In my field of cinema and audiovisual studies at the university in France, theory is barely on the agenda at all. […] We are witnessing the return of older forms of criticism that I had thought it would be impossible to speak of without ridicule. This is a reaction against jargon, and against the ‘ravages’ of analytic frameworks, and more generally against every approach that is slightly scientific (obviously cognitivism is the target here). There are some who have no problem speaking in this regard about a ‘fascistic stranglehold’ ‘that aspires to doctrinal control’ in the university, and they cite Gombrowicz: ‘every theory is an error of thought.’ The fashion is to

\textsuperscript{30} Vernet and Percheron, ‘Entretien’, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{31} Roger Odin, ‘Christian Metz et la linguistique’, *Irır*, 10, pp. 81-104.
eulogize the ‘je ne sais quoi’, a ‘je ne sais quoi’ that constitutes, seemingly, ‘the appeal of the university’. And I who believed that the university was supposed to teach rigorous thinking – I was going to say rigorous epistemology, but that’s a big word nowadays.

In ‘Theory, Post-Theory, Neo-Theories: Changes in Discourses, Changes in Objects’, Francesco Casetti says something similar: ‘there is an increasing de-legitimization of rationality and rationalized discourses’, and he speaks of ‘the end of explanation’. I have to admit that I no longer detect among my students the same desire for theory that I found in my early years of teaching at Paris III. It’s true that theory was fashionable then, but, as Metz points out, ‘that tells us something about fashion, not about theory.’ Rather than lament this state of affairs, we need to ask why it has come to this. Dominique Chateau suggests two possible answers: ‘Perhaps due to laziness, because it [theory] requires work. Or perhaps also in line with the postmodern tendency that too often traces theory back to ideology.’ For my part, I have advanced several hypotheses: What if theory has become discredited by its own polemics? What if theory has become too distant from common sense, from the social life of films (the problem of immanentism), and from the individual’s relation with film (the problem of interpretation)?

In this passage, Metz is taking himself to task – as the film lover that he was – above all. How can we be surprised if students refuse to do theory if we start by telling them this? On the contrary, I think that Metz’s work can help to reposition theory at the centre of students’ attention. In reality, Metz is the epitome of somebody who theorized cinema because he loved it. Chateau is certainly correct in saying that any theoretical approach requires work to master its tools, but I am not convinced that the problem lies here. What students need to be made to understand is

37 Chateau, L’invention, p. 162.
38 Metz, ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, p. 80 (translation modified).
precisely that these tools enable us to deepen our relationship with the thing we love. The quotation from Metz that we should remember is this: ‘in wishing to construct the film into an object of knowledge, one extends, by an additional degree of sublimation, the passion for seeing that made the cinephile and the institution what they are’. For my own part, I can think of many instances where it was theoretical reflection about a film that brought me to love it – not least *A Day in the Country* (Jean Renoir, F 1936), which I had no special feelings for until I examined it as an example of how the fiction film functions.

From the point of view of researchers who persist with theory, things have also changed considerably since Metz. In ‘Le Cinéma et …’, the opening article from *Christian Metz et la théorie du cinéma*, Raymond Bellour shows that what makes Metz a ‘founder of discursivity’ lies in his position of ‘self-imposed exteriority’. Metz insisted on this on several occasions: ‘I am a little outside of the world of cinema, engrossed in a different mental universe.’ ‘For me, cinema is rather a corpus. It is my reservoir of examples, it is the thing *in relation to which* I say things that stir me. In short, cinema is my “theme” rather than my “predicate”.’

In saying this, Metz inserts himself into a tradition going back to filmology, which he actually refers to in his thesis application and in some of his writings. However, when I look at publications by cinema theorists in recent years (at least from a certain number of them, and they are many), I notice that I am faced with a totally different discourse. Everyone has a go at defining cinema, or rather, at defending his ‘idea of cinema’, to use Dudley Andrew’s phrase. I will limit myself here to some examples taken from writings by theorist friends, which I find important and interesting for several reasons. In the deliberately provocatively titled *What Cinema Is!*, Dudley Andrew straightaway emphasizes that there are different ‘ideas of cinema’ (the cinema of attractions, non-narrative cinema, educational cinema, industrial cinema, even amateur cinema), and that each one obliges us to have an open mind on cinema as a whole. But his entire argument is a defence and illustration of an idea of cinema, an idea that he opposes to another that is related to digitization:

39 Ibid., p. 79 (translation modified).
42 Rediscovered by Martin Lefebvre and published in ‘L’aventure filmologique. Documents et jalons d’une histoire institutionnelle’, *Cinémas*, 17/2-3 (2007), 59-100 (pp. 59-60).
The films some of us most care about – and consider central to the enterprise of cinema in toto – have a mission [...]: they aim to discover, to encounter, to confront, and to reveal. If anything is endangered by the newly digitalized audiovisual culture, it is a taste for the encounters such voyages of discovery can bring about. Apparently, many today feel that the world and the humans who inhabit it have been sufficiently discovered, that no new revelations await, at least not in a medium dominated by entertainment and advertising.44

So, the whole book aims to present us with forms that are captured by this movement of revealing in the acts of recording, composing, and screening. Raymond Bellour addresses this question in terms of dispositive in La querelle des dispositifs. His definition is precise and final:

[T]he experienced screening of a film, in a dark room, for a prescribed duration in a more-or-less-collective viewing experience, has become and remains the condition of a unique experience of perception and memory that defines the spectator and that every other situation of vision more or less distorts. And only this can be called ‘cinema’.45

The aim of this strict definition is to make it possible to distinguish the cinematic experience from various experiences that are related to the use of cinematic language in other contexts, experiences that are ‘sufficiently different’ for us not to confuse them.46 But these other experiences are not held in low regard; in fact, the majority of this work by Bellour is devoted to them and to detailed analysis of an impressive number of installations and productions of all kinds, in order to determine their specificity.

In Que reste-t-il du cinéma?, Jacques Aumont imposes a different limit on the cinematic experience. He admits that the ‘mental model’ of cinema can function in several dispositives – for instance, in front of a domestic television and even in front of a computer – and that the advent of the digital has changed nothing at this level,47 but he considers that ‘any presentation of a film which enables me to interrupt or to modulate the experience is not cinematic’, ‘it is not cinema’. For Aumont, cinema is defined by ‘the

44 Ibid., p. xviii.
46 Bellour, La querelle, p. 16.
production of a gaze that is captured in time. It’s worth noting that the same theorist proposed a rather different definition of cinema in *A quoi pensent les films*: ‘The object of analysis is the animated image insofar as it considers itself to be an image, and insofar as it produces thought’, to which he added, ‘many run-of-the-mill films do not satisfy this condition’. The phrase ‘object of analysis’ insists on the explicitly constructed character of the cinema object, thereby avoiding any essentialist definition. Cinema is understood here as a specific ‘place of ideation’. A few years earlier, in ‘Mon très cher objet’, Aumont anticipated Andrew’s stances and saw the digital as the death of cinema.

It is in its final death throes if we think of it as a machine for showing the world. […] we are already in a position, technically speaking, to fabricate things that will seem like film but which will be entirely reconstituted. […] (I am not saying that this will not also have the bonus of giving pleasure and a sense of appreciation. I am saying that this will no longer be, that it no longer is, cinema).

Unlike the authors I have just mentioned, whose concern is to arrive at a precise, limiting definition of cinema, Philippe Dubois has taken on the heroic task of developing a (very) broad conception that includes everything that goes on these days in museums and galleries as installations:

With all due respect to purists of every stripe, who hold tight to a lost, dreamed-for, regressive identity for cinema, and who still live in the nostalgic belief of an unimpeachable (but exploded) specificity, yes this is cinema, open and multiple – an ‘expanded’ cinema that has overstepped its boundaries and frames. This is non-theatrical cinema, cinema outside the walls, outside the dispositive.

In short, Dubois finds cinema wherever there is a moving image. In *Eye of the Century*, Francesco Casetti occupies a somewhat in-between position. He suggests that we need to distinguish between two forms of cinema – *Cinema 1.0*, which is ‘photographic’ cinema, cinema of the ‘trace’, that is produced

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48 Aumont, *Que reste-t-il*, pp. 82-84 (emphasis in original).
for screening in a theatre for a spectator who is invited to adopt a specific discipline of the eye, and Cinema 2.0, which is digital cinema and can be seen in extremely varied dispositives and which also is more often found in the fields of interactive multimedia communication (gaming) or of physical effects (speed, vertigo, hybridization of humans) than in narrative film. It is quite clear that Casetti is rather perplexed in the face of this second kind of cinema, but in a slightly desperate attempt to preserve his object of study, he insists on the fact that it really still is cinema: ‘Cinema continues to be discussed, and, indeed, discussed a great deal. Even now, it has an important role to play [...] So, in spite of the far-reaching changes it has undergone, it remains a significant presence.’

The first observation that arises from this quick review and comparison with Metz is that we realize how resolutely different things are today. Some of these definitions give rise to theoretical developments that are extremely detailed, others less so, but what they all have in common is that, to various degrees, they are written in defence of an object of love. You get the feeling that something very profound is being touched upon here, each person’s passion for cinema, for the very raison d’être of a person or their life – where to oppose their conception of cinema is experienced as a kind of sacrilege. In fact, what we are witnessing is a paradigm shift, from one of exteriority to one of interiority, from a descriptive theory to a prescriptive theory that defines cinema in terms of values. We have seen this happen before. As early as 1948, Gilbert Cohen-Séat pointed out in La Nef, with a certain wickedness, cinema’s great appetite for defining itself – ‘to define itself, we must first understand that cinema attempts to do this from within. Convinced that it can give some internal logical coherence to its own conception of itself, it is more than ready to feel satisfied’. And he equated this position to ‘puerility of egocentric thinking’ as Piaget defined it, before proposing ‘leaving the cinema, thinking about it from the outside, and completely changing our bearings’, which opened the way towards filmology. For his part, Metz opposes two kinds of ‘theory’ at the start of Language and Cinema:

[T]heory which is concerned with films to come, which sees things in terms of influence, which does not hesitate to counsel and prescribe,
which seeks to respond directly to the technical problems of the ‘creative artist’ and is significant only from this perspective. On the other hand, there is that type of theory which is concerned with discourses which *already exist* and which seeks to analyze them as givens.\(^{54}\)

There is something striking in this back-and-forth between the two paradigms; the internal one still seems to prevail, to the point that we may ask if it is perhaps not cinema itself that resists the external approach. We could support this argument by noting that filmology has practically disappeared from view, and that Metz himself in ‘Cinema: Language or Language System?’, even though he had already decided to pursue a linguistic approach, clearly defended an ‘idea’ of cinema, i.e. the cinema of Rossellini against the ‘montage-roi’ cinema of Eisenstein,\(^{55}\) and he did so with a virulence that easily bears comparison to those that I discussed before. (‘This essay springs from the conviction that the “montage-roi” approach is not a fruitful path for film.’\(^{56}\)) As for the present day, in the post-Metz period, we have just seen what it has become ... However, I should point out that these examples do not illustrate the same story at all. As Martin Lefebvre makes clear, if filmology petered out, it is not so much because it proposed an external approach; rather, it had institutional problems, personnel problems (see the case of Cohen-Séat) and also, to an extent, the scientific results were not of the quality its practitioners were counting on (especially the experimental results).\(^{57}\) The fact that Metz started by positioning himself partly outside the paradigm of exteriority is due to something else entirely: for Metz as a film-lover, leaving the fusing, affective positioning in reference to the object remained difficult, even if he had the will to do it. So it was not cinema that was resistant; it was the film-lover in Metz, someone who had a certain vision of his object of love (and this is true for all objects of love, not just for cinema). These days, still other reasons are given for abandoning the paradigm of exteriority. Confronted with the digital, and with the

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\(^{54}\) Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 11 (emphasis in original).

\(^{55}\) Metz’s expression ‘montage-roi’ was translated as ‘montage-or-bust’ in the English edition of ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ [1964], in *Film Language*, trans. by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974 [1968]), 31-91 (pp. 31-39; translation modified). I have decided to use the French original instead, which could be understood as ‘the king montage’ or ‘the all powerful montage’ [translator’s note].

\(^{56}\) Metz even goes into a long diatribe against the ‘spirit of manipulation’ that he says characterizes our society and culminates in productions that have been programmed on computers. The parallel here with Dudley Andrew’s negative views on the digital is striking. Christian Metz, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, p. 38.

\(^{57}\) Lefebvre, ‘L’aventure’, pp. 59-100.
dispersion of ‘cinema’ into extremely diverse spaces (museums and galleries, computers, tablets and mobile phones, etc.), these theorists see cinema as threatened. So, according to them, a defence needs to be mounted. The definitions I’ve described are attempts to intervene to preserve the object of research (and of love), by circumscribing it in a precise way (Andrew, Bellour, Aumont), or by making large claims for it (Dubois), or by accepting more or less unwillingly (Casetti) its protean quality. Both kinds of theories that Metz mentions (as quoted above) are about saving cinema. How can we not approve of approaches like this? But this should not prevent us from asking certain questions. On the one hand, we should ask whether the threat is actually greater today than it was in the past. We could put forward a counterargument that cinema has never been better off, and never have so many films been seen by so many viewers. On the other hand, in some of the best writing, the goal is to defend not just cinema but a set of values. Yet what is striking is that these values change depending on the author (and even, as we saw with Aumont, for the same author). Discovery, attention, the production of thought, encountering the real, openness ... each writer clearly considers these values essential to cinema. My feeling is that we could keep debating forever because there is no essence of cinema. Like all social constructions, cinema is multiple and variable. For D.N. Rodowick, this plasticity is one of the best reasons for speaking of ‘the virtual life of film’:

I think there is a deeper and more philosophical way of discussing ‘virtuality’ in relation to both film and cinema studies. One consistent lesson from the history of film theory is that there has never been a consensus concerning the answer to the question ‘What is cinema?’ And for this reason the evolving thought on cinema in the twentieth century has persisted in a continual state of identity crisis.58

Given this situation, Metz’s position is to propose an attempt to describe this social construction (and not to promote one). This description, contrary to what we see in the other texts I have cited, is devoid of drama: ‘For me, the fact of imagining the cinema as one social fact among others, and not more important than them, calling on the same general methods of analysis as them, is a painless operation that does not require a prior victory against an internal sacrilege.’59

58 D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 11.
59 Vernet and Percheron, ‘Entretien’, p. 27.
The definition of cinema that Metz provides diverges radically from those we have been reading: ‘[C]inema is nothing more than the combination of messages which society calls “cinematic”.’  

There are two ways to interpret this definition. Either cinema is what society as a whole accepts as cinema; what everyone is ready to recognize as cinema (a common denominator). Or, cinema is everything that is called cinema in the social space; cinema in all its diversity. In ‘Sémiologie audio-visuelle et linguistique générative’, Metz privileges the first of these, speaking of the definition of film insofar as it ‘functions in a real way in society’.  

We note, however, that, in both cases, the definition of cinema depends on the judgement of the society and that it is thereby susceptible to change as society evolves historically. In ‘The Fiction Film and its Spectator’, Metz notes, moreover: ‘The cinema as a whole, insofar as it is a social fact, and therefore also the psychological state of the ordinary spectator, can take on appearances very different from those to which we are accustomed.’  

So, what society as a whole called ‘cinema’ during film’s early years is quite different to what was understood by the term in the 1950s. Likewise, if we compare the definition given by Metz (in terms of the pertinent aspects of the matter of expression) and what is going on today, the situation has been somewhat reversed: while Metz excluded animation from the territory covered by cinema because it does not make use of the quality of mechanical duplication, a number of theorists (Lev Manovich, Sean Cubitt) consider that from now on, owing to the advent of the digital, animation is at the heart of the definition of cinema. In a general way, it is clear that the term ‘cinema’ covers a wide variety of things whose history Metz invites us to trace. Let me make myself clear: what I am saying here implies no negative judgement of the principle of a normative theory. To defend cinema in the name of values is not only a praiseworthy project, it is also necessary – and the fact that there are several competing definitions of cinema is a good sign as far as the vitality of the object of cinema is concerned in society and for democracy. But it seems to me that it is important today to recall the existence of the external paradigm – i.e. the Metzian paradigm – because, on the one hand, we tend to forget quite how much the internal paradigm has come to dominate, and, on the other, because to reintroduce this paradigm into theoretical thinking gives us some perspective on the debates that rage in

the field. In short, we need to consider these debates as something to be analyzed. Viewed this way, the definitions of cinema that I have listed here become part of the object of analysis. This passage to a meta-level radically alters how we view the situation. Aumont, who switches levels in this way in *Que reste-t-il du cinéma?*, which I cited earlier, thus suggests that the entire problem arises from the fact that we lack a word:

If we say that cinema no longer has an exclusive claim over moving images, it is not to say that it has disappeared, no more than it has dissolved into a greater whole where it is more difficult to distinguish. What is missing in the end, to put this relatively simple situation simply, is a word, a unique word that would express ‘various social usages of moving images’. But this word does not exist, not even in English, nor in Greek, and this is probably the entirely silly reason why we want so much to say that cinema is everywhere: it is not the thing that we want to universalize, it is the word and by default ...

In *La fin du cinéma?*, Gaudreault and Marion believe they have discovered this word: ‘animage’. The problem is that this word focuses on a sole aspect of contemporary moving images – for instance, it says nothing about their capacity to circulate and stand in for one another, as this has never previously been the case. Personally, I would say most simply that we need to distinguish between *theory of cinema* and *theory of cinematic language*, as cinema is a specific (which is not to say homogeneous) space of communication among all the spaces of communication that mobilize cinematic language.

**Analysis of Cinematic Language Today**

If we can regard Metz as a ‘founder of discursivity’, it is in his capacity of ‘founder’ of the semiology of cinema, which is to say the ‘science’ of cinematic language. (I am putting scare quotes around ‘science’ because Metz was very wary and even mistrustful of the term.) Yet, what strikes

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63 Aumont, *Que reste-t-il*, pp. 59-60.
me is that today barely anybody is interested in the question of cinematic language.

It must be said that everything has been done to delegitimize the linguistic approach to cinema, which is still described as an approach that diminishes cinema at the expense of language, even though Metz intended otherwise. His aim was to oppose the cinematic language system to language but to make use of methods drawn from linguistics (and the questions posed by linguistics) in order to explain how this language system works. As for the cognitivists, they continue to assert that cinema is not a language system even as they analyze how cinema produces meaning, affect, and relations, which could very well be considered to be the definition of a language system; let us remember that Metz defined semiology as the study ‘of mechanisms by which human significations are transmitted in human societies’. 66 One thing is certain – today, cinematic language is everywhere, and it has never been so widely exploited as a means of expression and communication.

There is a great temptation to see in this phenomenon the proof of the prophecies of Alexandre Astruc from the period of 1948-49, when he announced the arrival of the camera-pen (caméra stylo): ‘The future of cinema is entirely in its potential to develop like a language.’ 67 This is, however, to miss the point. When he said this, Astruc was dreaming of an auteurist cinema, in the sense of a cinema that could be compared to literature: ‘Cinema has had its chroniclers and its photographers, and now it is awaiting its Stendhal, its Shakespeare, its Pascal, its Valéry and its Proust.’ 68 So, with Astruc, we are in the space of communication of ‘cinema as art’. Yet what is going on today is quite different. Certainly, it is possible to make films at home, like a writer writes books – films that could probably be classed as art – 69 but the real revolution is elsewhere: cinematic language has invaded the space of everyday communications. This is something else entirely.

To my knowledge, only one work addresses this question directly: Lev Manovich’s The Language of New Media. The computer is at the centre

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68 Lherminier, L’art du cinéma, pp. 592-93.
of Manovich’s attention, but it is cinematic language that he uses as an analytical tool, saying ‘the theory and history of cinema serve as the key conceptual “lens” through which I look at new media’.70

Manovich’s book is organized around two movements. He first asks: In what ways do new media change cinematic language? He suggests these possibilities: the capacity that the computer affords for navigation, the transformation of the concept of point of view in gaming, the development of spatial montage connected to the possibility of multiplying windows on the screen, and hybridization (Manovich uses the term ‘cinegratography’ to describe the mix of cinematic language and graphical elements).71 Second: What does cinema bring to new media? Manovich insists on the fact that cinematic language truly flows through the veins of new media: ‘a hundred years after cinema’s birth, cinematic ways of seeing the world, of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one experience to the next, are being extended to become the basic ways in which computer users access and interact with all cultural data’.72

Later, Manovich says:

Cinema, the major cultural form of the twentieth century, has found a new life as the toolbox of a computer user. Cinematic means of perception, of connecting space and time, of representing human memory, thinking, and emotions become a way of work and a way of life for millions in the computer age. Cinema’s aesthetic strategies have become basic organizational principles of computer software. The window in a fictional world of a cinematic narrative has become a window in a datascape. In short, what was cinema has become human-computer interface.73

Manovich even shows that the seeds of some of what we think of as the ‘novelty’ of new media already existed in pre-cinema (for instance, the structure of the loop).74

My aim here is not to summarize the contribution of this extremely rich and, for that matter, remarkably clear book – I can only invite readers to look

71 Ibid., p. 262.
72 Ibid., p. 87 (my emphasis).
73 Ibid., p. 87 and 92.
74 Manovich, ‘New Temporality: Loop as a Narrative Engine’, in Language of New Media, pp. 264-69. A striking illustration of this is the current vogue for GIFs (named after the name of the format, Graphic Interchange Format), which are short animated films consisting of a repeated movement. GIFs were not used in this way when Manovich’s book came out.
at it. I would like to pursue these thoughts starting not with the computer but with a tool that Manovich does not deal with much: the mobile phone. The book dates from 2002, which pre-dates the advent of smartphones and the spread of video onto mobile phones. We should note that everything that Manovich says about the relation between cinematic language and computers also applies to the mobile phone, which by now is simply a small computer. But the mobile is also more than a computer; it is a private device that we always have with us, and it seems to me that this changes quite a few things in relation to the usage of cinematic language.

So, if there is a tool that enables cinematic language to function like a language of everyday communication, it is the mobile phone (more than computers, even portable ones). Today, thanks to the mobile phone, everyone can communicate through this language whenever or wherever they want, and what is more, they can choose from several modes of communication (text message, email, social networks).

However, in the same way that Manovich shows that cinematic language is changed when it is enabled by computers, we ought to ask ourselves in what ways it changes when conveyed by mobile phones. This is a complex issue, and I will limit myself to a few examples. Two questions raised by Metz in *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film*\(^{75}\) may serve as our starting points.

The first concerns the status of cinematic enunciation and deictics. In cinema, Metz tells us, what ‘makes the deictic aspect of enunciation difficult is, for a start, a fact that has often been broached but whose importance we have not assessed enough. When a message is sent, there is nobody there, and there is no body, there is only text.’\(^{76}\) Most of the time, the film viewer does not think about the enunciator of a film, and ‘doesn’t even think of the Image-Maker’ (this is a reference to Albert Laffay). ‘On the contrary, he does not believe that things reveal themselves: he simply sees images.’\(^{77}\) Filmic enunciation is *impersonal*. And yet the problem with the mobile phone is rather to escape from personal enunciation. In general, video that is produced on mobile devices is received as if it has been uttered by an ‘I’, the owner of the phone; ‘Look at the pictures that I have taken’ is the message that we read when we view a video on a mobile phone. It is certainly not impossible to block this personification of enunciation, but this requires a

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76 Marie and Vernet, ‘Entretien’, p. 294.
77 Metz, *L’énonciation*, p. 18.
specific effort and, above all, a switch in the space of communication (for example, by passing into the space of communication of the fiction film). In the same way, every image that is produced on a mobile says ‘here’ (it is not insignificant that the question you hear most often in mobile phone conversations is ‘Where are you?’) and ‘now’. This is very much deictic enunciation.\[^{78}\]

The second question concerns audiovisual conversation, to use the title of Gianfranco Bettetini’s *La conversazione audiovisiva*.\[^{79}\] Metz comments on it to emphasize its paradoxical status:

The paradox is that he has chosen the metaphor of conversation for types of discourse that are radically different from it, and the second paradox is that Bettetini’s work, which does not lack subtlety, insists greatly on this separation. Film is not interactive, it does not receive feedback, so the conversation that this book discusses is imaginary and, as it were, fantasmatic.\[^{80}\]

Metz hammers the point in his interview with Michel Marie and Marc Vernet: ‘*There is no exchange*.\[^{81}\]’ With the mobile phone, due to the possibility of immediately disseminating images and speech either from afar or up close (two or more people using Bluetooth can exchange videos face to face), cinematic language enables situations that really are similar to conversation. It would be interesting to see if these exchanges followed the equivalent ‘rules’ that govern conversations using language. All of the questions that Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni puts forward\[^{82}\] in relation to verbal interaction demand to be put in this context: Does turn-taking occur? What structure does interaction take? What kind of interaction are we dealing with (dialogue, interview, debate …)? What are the objectives of this interaction? One thing is certain: today we are witnessing interactions through the medium of cinematic language that are unprecedented.

In the face of these new situations, there is a great temptation to ask whether it is the nature of cinematic language that has changed or its status (the fact that it is conveyed by mobile phones). In fact, it seems to

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78 Regarding the shift from impersonal to personal enunciation, see also the articles by Dominique Blüher and Alain Boillat in this volume.


me that this misses the point. It would be difficult to separate the analysis of how language functions from the analysis of how it functions in this or that communication context, because it is the context, to some extent at least, that determines how that language functions. In the examples that I have looked at, it is definitely the mobile phone that says *I, here, now,* and which enables audiovisual conversation to happen, but it is the mobile phone inasmuch as it is inscribed in the frame of the space of everyday communication. On the other hand, Metz’s analysis is still valuable in the ‘cinema’ space of communication. The proof of this is that when we watch a *feature film* on a mobile phone, enunciation functions in the way that Metz describes it, i.e., in an impersonal way. It is clear from this how necessary it is to adopt a pragmatic approach to language that takes into account the context of its enunciation.

We should also pay attention to the major *modes* used in communicating with cinematic language in everyday life. While the fictionalizing mode is sometimes brought into play (in the space of everyday communication, young people in particular play by fabricating mini fictions on their mobiles), the documentarizing mode is without doubt one of the most important; for example note-taking, memory aids, documents, witness accounts (today, as soon as there is an event, everyone takes out their phone), and personal archives (concerts I’ve been to, exhibitions I’ve visited, etc.). The mobile also enables the private mode. It has, for example, replaced the home movie; from now on, it is the mobile that circulates from hand to hand among family and friends. As Jean-Louis Boissier has acutely remarked, ‘pass me the film’ has come to mean ‘pass me the mobile’.

The intimate mode is also extremely present: ‘The mobile phone’, observes Laurence Allard, ‘while remaining a technology of communication with other people, has also become an authentic means of communication with oneself.’ So cinematic language, like verbal language, functions as an operator that constitutes the *ego* (some psychologists regard the mobile as an *ego* substitute).

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83 On the concept of *modes*, see Odin, *Les espaces de communication*, pp. 43-82.
84 In an interview for the Pocket Films Festival in July 2006, ‘Le film téléphonique comme *shifter*,’ Boissier observed, ‘Because we had not previewed the material to pass these films onto the big screen, I said to the audience: “I’m passing the film to you.” And at the very moment I said that, I thought to myself, “To pass a film,” that could be it. The phone is passed from hand to hand among the audience members.’ See www.festivalpocketfilms.fr.
85 Laurence Allard, ‘*Express Yourself 3.0!* Le mobile comme technologie pour soi et quelques autres, entre double agir communicationnel et continuum disjonctif soma-technologique’, in *Téléphone mobile et création*, p. 140.
86 Serge Tisseron, personal correspondence.
Finally, I think I can maintain that the mobile compels viewing the world in the aesthetic mode. In *La vie esthétique*, Laurent Jenny observes:

As so often, my eye is drawn to the picturesque display of one of these 24-hour New York grocers run by Pakistanis who offer a great swathe of merchandise, from ball-point pens to bouquets [...]. Mechanically, I take out my mobile phone ... and so that I can see more, I am once again seized by the mania of magnifying with the digital zoom and absorbed by the differing levels of transparency between cubes of ice and cubes of pineapple. The result, which I check instantly, fills me with astonishment. The object has become totally unrecognizable and gives rise to an undeniably cubist composition, from that marvellous period between 1908 and 1912 when Braque and Picasso competed at the edges of abstraction.87

More generally, the mobile invites us to view the world via its screen: ‘Have you noticed’, remarks once again Laurent Jenny, this time in an interview in *Le Monde*, ‘that people use their mobile phones not to photograph and archive, but to look straightaway at what they’ve just taken? They want in some way to see “framed” either themselves or what they are looking at in a frame ...’88 To see through a frame: is this not the primary gesture of aestheticizing the world?

These thoughts have sought simply to show that we would be well advised to pursue Metz’s work on cinematic language while taking new developments into account, in particular the new equipment that enables us to convey this language. There is here a kind of social urgency, just as Metz recognized the urgency of initiating semiological thinking by means of the fiction film (because ‘it is the *fictional formula* that the public likes, that is what responds to dominant forces’89); today, it is at the level of the most common usage that work needs to be begun again. After language itself, cinematic language has become the most important language of our times for everyday communication and perhaps for the construction of our identities.

In this article, I have endeavoured to reconstruct what, for me, is current about Christian Metz’s work, at the level of how to think of research, at the level of the relation between theory and cinema, and at the level of the aims of research. I might also have called this paper ‘What I learned from

Christian Metz’,\(^{90}\) because his ideas are what have guided me and continue to guide me as a researcher. And so I will conclude by once again quoting Metz on Barthes: ‘Today, I am the one who is committed to return it to him, to tell it to other people, to everyone who would like to understand (me) beyond words.’\(^{91}\)

*Translated from French by Cormac Deane*

**About the author**


**About the translator**


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\(^{90}\) This is the title of the paper that I presented at the Metz colloquium at the University of Zurich in June 2013.

\(^{91}\) Marie and Vernet, ‘Entretien’, p. 296.