6. Barthes’ Early Film Semiology and the Legacy of Filmology in Metz

Guido Kirsten

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/CH06

Abstract

This chapter discusses how Christian Metz was inspired by the French filmology movement. Filmology, having been founded in the years after WWII, endeavoured to study cinema in its psychological, sociological, and philosophical complexity. Metz was impressed by the distance filmology took from the institutions of film production and criticism. Also, several important terms introduced by filmology found their way into Metz’s writings. Furthermore, the essay speculates about the more subcutaneous influence of two essays by Roland Barthes from the *Revue internationale de filmologie*. Although Metz never discusses these texts in detail, they may have played an important role in formulating his own project. By sketching this possible line, this essay contributes to the genealogy of Metz’s thinking.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, filmology, history of film theory, terminology, cinematic signs

In the year following Etienne Souriau’s death in 1979, Christian Metz published an article in an issue of the prestigious *Revue d’esthétique* dedicated to the philosopher and aesthetician. Metz pays tribute to Souriau’s contribution to French filmology after WWII, highlighting the importance of essays such as ‘The Structure of the Filmic Universe and the Vocabulary of Filmology’ (originally published in 1951 in the *Revue internationale de filmologie*) and ‘Les grands caractères de l’univers filmique’. In passing,

1 Etienne Souriau, ‘The Structure of the Filmic Universe and the Vocabulary of Filmology’ [1951], trans. by Marc Jones, in *Filmology and the Origins of Film Studies*, ed. by Kate Ince, Vinzenz
Metz stresses the impact that filmology had on the development of his own film semiotics:

Basically, filmology was in certain regards a rather direct prefiguration of the semiology of the cinema. In both cases, it is a matter of approaching the cinema from the outside, of placing it within the discourse of the human sciences, and not that of cineastes, cinephiles or critics.²

Alain Boillat has remarked that the words ‘basically’ and ‘in certain regards’ qualify Metz’s claim to some extent,³ and it is true that the relationship between his own project and the filmology movement is not without ambivalence – at least in retrospect. For while certain filmology concepts had a considerable influence on the thinking of the young Metz, conversely, his writing has also had a great impact on the knowledge and understanding of these concepts. And this impact has been twofold: the renewal of cinema studies in the 1960s through semiology introduced filmological notions into common usage by researchers, but it has also for a long time obscured knowledge of this heritage. Indeed, it would appear that the success of semiology has contributed to the forgetting of filmology.

Filmology was only rediscovered in the Anglophone world during the 1980s, after the period of semiology’s hegemony, thanks to Edward Lowry’s seminal study. In Italy and France, it returned to critical attention through Francesco Casetti’s history of film theories, and it was introduced to the German-speaking audience in the years after 1997, when over ten articles of the *Revue internationale de filmologie* were published in translation in the review *montage AV*. Crucially, the extraordinary 2009 double issue of *Cinémas* significantly deepened understanding of the filmological project.⁴

The influence of filmology on Metz is as much epistemological as terminological. The epistemological dimension emerges primarily in filmology’s general attitude to cinema and cinematic culture, and then, more

---


specifically, with the semiological or proto-semiological ideas promoted in the *Revue*.

After briefly addressing the general position that attracted Metz, I will comment upon the terminology that he used and popularized, before finally building a hypothesis concerning the possible influence of two 1960 articles on semiology by Roland Barthes published in the *Revue internationale de filmologie*. These articles are the first examples of structuralist film semiotics, and for this reason it is surprising that Metz barely mentions them in his first writings. It is no less astonishing that the literature on the genesis of Metz’s thought has completely ignored this possible source of influence. While the affinity of Metz’s writing with filmology has generally been acknowledged, the connection between Barthes’ articles and Metz’s first essays remains unexplored. I will argue that even though Metz’s reaction to the ideas Barthes advanced in these articles appears to be present only ‘negatively’ (through its absence, so to speak), their analysis may help us gain a clearer understanding of Metz’s semiotics. It may also go some way toward explaining the specific outline of his project, illuminating for instance why Metz carefully avoided a definition of filmic signs, concentrating instead on the syntactic axis.

1 The General Epistemological Attitude

In an article entitled ‘Introduction à une filmologie de la filmologie’, published in 1951 in the *Cahiers du cinéma* under his pseudonym Florent Kirsch (composed of his son’s first name and his wife’s maiden name), André Bazin attacked the filmologists for their alleged ‘scientific’ methods that, he argued, led them to completely ignore individual filmic works. In Bazin’s eyes, the ‘distinguished professors’ of the filmology movement still considered cinema to be a minor art, one that could become a legitimate field of academic study only when ennobled by established disciplines such

---

6 The only paper I am aware of that deals with these questions is by Kate Ince. I am collaborating with her and Vinzenz Hediger on *Filmology and the Origins of Film Studies*, an anthology of writings from the *Revue internationale de filmologie* [see Note 1]. Her talk, ‘Roland Barthes, Filmology and the History of Audiovisual Media Study in France’, was given at the Film-Philosophy conference in Amsterdam on 11 July 2013 and has not been published.
7 This did not prevent Bazin from taking part in a filmological congress in 1955, documented in the *Revue international de filmologie*, 20-24 (1955), pp. 95-97. It would appear that using a pseudonym was indeed a judicious move.
as psychology, philosophy, biology, and so on. In a rather polemical tone, Bazin writes:

To be a distinguished filmologist, one will need to be only as familiar with the classics of the big screen as a candidate for a high school diploma would need to be with medieval manuscripts. This, far from being an inherent handicap, is for the filmologist a source of pride. Certainly, there's nothing stopping filmologists from going to the cinema, but one would not advise them to do so, for this superfluous baggage may well darken the nascent science. Filmology is the study of Cinema-in-itself, with little concern for its history and works.8

But filmology's habit of ignoring the critical discourse pertaining to individual films, which inspired Bazin's strident polemic, was for Metz precisely to filmology's credit. As the above quotation from his homage to Souriau demonstrates, Metz was fascinated by the distance that filmology introduced between itself and established filmic culture.

In the conclusion to his first essay 'Le cinéma: langue ou language?' Metz distinguishes between four ways of approaching cinema: film criticism, cinema history, film theory and, finally, filmology. The principal difference that he identifies between film theory and filmology is that film theorists were 'either film-makers, enthusiastic amateurs, or critics' and that as such they were 'part of the cinematographic institution'. Filmology, on the other hand, was 'the scientific study conducted from outside by psychologists, psychiatrists, aestheticians, sociologists, educators, and biologists. Their status, and their procedures, place them outside the institution.'9

It was precisely this distance that initially attracted Metz to filmology. One finds it also in the outline for a thèse d'Etat research project that he submitted to the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), which was recently rediscovered by Martin Lefebvre. Metz here underlines 'the independence [of filmology] with respect to cinema criticism and

---

8 Florent Kirsch [André Bazin], ‘Introduction à une filmologie de la filmologie’, Cahiers du cinéma, 5 (1951), 33-38 (p. 36). Similar criticism was uttered some years later in Positif: '[F]ilmology appears overall [...] like a monstrous excrescence of psychology, pedagogy and the sociology of Saturday night cinema. Filmology wants to be a science and for that it must pay the high price of objectivity's ransom.' Xavier Tillette, 'Les filmologues en congrès', Positif, 14-15 (1955), pp.164-65.

history’, and he proposes to integrate his filmic-linguistic approach into filmology as a new area of research.10

2 Terminological References

The epistemological distance interested Metz to the extent that it generated research methods and a technical vocabulary that differed from those of filmmakers and critics. The need to invent a new and precise terminology had been stressed time and again by filmologists such as Gilbert Cohen-Séat, Etienne Souriau, and others. Metz borrowed many notions from filmological writings, introducing them into the field of cinema studies. Some of these notions today form part of the basic vocabulary that students learn during their first semesters of study, and include terms such as ‘diegesis’ and ‘diegetic’, ‘profilmic’ and ‘impression of reality’.

Alain Boillat reconstitutes the trajectory of how Metz appropriates and employs the concept of ‘diegesis’. He writes:

As soon as one begins to examine the discussions in detail, one notes that the concept of ‘diegesis’ and the questions raised by its definition number among the original concerns of the semiology of the cinema, which filmology does indeed appear to have ‘prefigured’, even if this relationship is sometimes rather underestimated by Metz’s thurifers.11

Metz appears to have used the concept for the first time in his 1965 essay on the impression of reality.12 But it assumes a more important position in his terminological system in the article ‘Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema’, which first appeared in French in the review *La linguistique* in 1966 and was republished in the first volume of his *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*. Here he writes:

---

10 Martin Lefebvre, ‘L’aventure filmologique: documents et jalons d’une histoire institutionelle’, *Cinémas*, 19/2-3 (2009), 59-100 (pp. 59-60). Metz even proposes to use an ‘experimental method’ to study differences in viewers’ understanding of a silent film, where some watch the film with intertitles and some without (pp. 61-62).


12 Christian Metz, ‘On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema’ [1965], in Metz, *Film Language*, 3-15 (pp. 10-12).
The concept of diegesis is as important for the film semiologist as the idea of art. [...] The term was introduced into the framework of cinema by Etienne Souriau. It designates the film’s represented instance [...] – that is to say, the sum of a film’s denotation: the narration itself, but also the fictional space and time dimensions implied in and by the narrative, and consequently the characters, the landscapes, the events, and other narrative elements, in so far as they are considered in their denoted aspect.13

Here, Metz clearly thinks of diegesis as equivalent to everything denoted in the film, and it includes things and events that are only indirectly or implicitly represented. This interpretation is evidently very close to Souriau’s original concept.14

In the same fashion, Metz began to use the word ‘pro-filmic’ in his very first writings on cinema and in a way that was quite similar to its accepted usage in filmology. As early as the third page of ‘Le cinéma: langue ou langage?’, he evokes the pro-filmic. In a footnote he clarifies and condenses Souriau’s definition: ‘Pro-filmic is everything that is placed before a camera or in front of which one puts it so that it “records”.’15 To my mind there is no more exact and synthetic way of expressing Souriau’s notion of the pro-filmic than one finds here.

In the introduction to his German translation of ‘The Structure of the Filmic Universe and the Vocabulary of Filmology’, Frank Kessler notes that of the eight terms that denote the seven levels of the filmic universe, only ‘pro-filmic’ and ‘diegetic’ survived the project of filmology.16 The fact that Metz used exactly these two terms in his writings of the 1960s is evidently no coincidence. From this, one can affirm how Metz’s writing was a catalyst for these crucial notions in film studies.

Metz equally played a significant role in popularizing the notion of the ‘impression of reality’. His 1965 article in the Cahiers du cinéma was to become a point of reference because it supplied one of the keywords in the debate about the ideology of the camera that was to wage from 1969 to 1972

13 Christian Metz, ‘Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema’ [1966], in Metz, Film Language, 92-107 (pp. 97-98).
14 One might also say that the diegetic is the entirety of filmic signs’ ‘extension’, at least if one allows for extensions to be fictional, as Lubomír Doležel suggests in Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 26.
in the *Cahiers* and in *Cinéthique*, and which was baptized retrospectively as ‘the quarrel of the impression of reality’.¹⁷

Metz’s article, which is less semiological than phenomenological,¹⁸ is above all a presentation of the views advanced by Albert Michotte in his important 1948 article, ‘The Nature of “Reality” in Cinematic Projections’.¹⁹ Later, in an issue of *Cinéthique* 9-10 (1971), Metz was even accused of an ‘uncritical adoption’ of the term ‘impression of reality’ and the problematic related to it.²⁰ But in fact Metz does not only repeat and reframe Michotte’s ideas. He also adds a number of important points, such as the distinction between the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ side in the creation of this impression. ‘Objective’ factors are to be found in all of the aspects in which the filmic images resemble reality’s appearance, while the subjective part is ‘the vital, organizing faculty of perception […] to realize (to make real) the object that it grasps’. ‘Between the two factors, there is a constant interaction’, Metz adds.²¹ He also contributes another phenomenological argument, adding to Michotte’s ideas, where he affirms that movement in cinema is even more important for creating the impression of reality since its nature is ‘immaterial’, because it offers itself in the first instance to sight and not to touch.²² Furthermore, he underlines that the impression of reality is not only linked to cinema’s realist aspect but also to its capacity to render purely fantastic and extraordinary phenomena.²³

---

¹⁸ Frank Kessler is right, however, to stress that Metz uses semiological concepts to reframe and reformulate this phenomenological question. See Kessler’s article in this volume. For Metz’s relation to phenomenology, see: Dominique Chateau and Martin Lefebvre, ‘Dance and Fetish: Phenomenology and Metz’s epistemological shift’, *October*, 148 (2014), pp. 103-32.
²⁰ ‘This notion is first introduced in the problematic developed out of the work of the Institut de Filmologie and the *Revue internationale de filmologie*, of which the article by Christian Metz in the *Cahiers du cinéma* (n° 166-167 – mai/juin 1965) constitutes an uncritical adoption. It is surely a memory of this text that led us to revive the term as an element able to solve quite different problems.’ Anon. [Jean-Paul Fargier, Gérard Leblanc], ‘(Texte collectif)’, *Cinéthique*, 9-10 (1971), 1-70 (p. 51).
²² ‘The strict distinction between object and copy, however, dissolves on the threshold of motion. Because movement is never material but is always visual, to reproduce its appearance is to duplicate its reality’ (Metz, ‘On the Impression of Reality’, p. 9; emphasis in original). This argument is somewhat doubtful, because motion can of course be felt (as in a punch or in getting hit by a flying object). In addition, even if Metz’s description were right, it would also be true of colours and of shadows – both of which are indeed ‘always visual’.
²³ ‘The feeling of credibility, which is so direct, operates on us in films of the unusual and marvellous, as well as in those that are “realistic”. Fantastic art is fantastic only as it convinces (otherwise it is merely ridiculous), and the power of unreality in film derives from the fact that the unreal seems to have been realized, unfolding before our eyes as if it were the flow of common
Metz himself picks up and reworks the notion of the ‘impression of reality’ in his 1975 article ‘The Fiction Film and its Spectator’, where he utilizes it to depict one of the major effects of the cinematic apparatus.\textsuperscript{24}

Finally, the influence of notions of ‘filmic fact’ and ‘cinematic fact’ upon Metz merits consideration. The idea of this distinction is already present in the final passages of ‘Le cinéma: Langue ou langage?’, but they figure more significantly in the first two chapters of \emph{Language and Cinema}, where they open discussion of the concepts of the filmic and the cinematographic. Firstly, Metz affirms Gilbert Cohen-Séat’s distinction between cinematic and filmic facts, the former being more institutional, the latter tending towards the perceptive or psychological.\textsuperscript{25} Thus the filmic event is found \textit{within} cinema, because the cinematic encompasses a whole array of processes that arise before and after the production and the reception of a film.

However, Metz refers to this distinction so as to introduce another, changing the meaning of the words ‘cinema’ and ‘cinematic’ so that they now designate specific codes at the \textit{interior} of the filmic event. His terminological discussion allows him to isolate terminologically the real subject of his semiology of the cinema, which he calls the ‘filmic-cinematographic’, that is, film traits that are ‘cinematographically relevant’, like, for instance, the codes of editing and camera movements.\textsuperscript{26}

3 The First Articles of a Semiology of the Cinema, from Barthes to Metz

I would like to explore the third thematic field in greater detail, which concerns the degree to which filmology can be considered a forerunner of film semiotics in a more specific way.
In the aforementioned outline of his *thèse d'Etat* research project, Metz noted that while filmology had integrated psychologists, psychoanalysts, sociologists, and experts from other disciplines, it had barely connected with linguistics. This was the void he sought to fill with his project.

However, the idea of a film 'language' can be found in filmological writings from early on. In the very first article in the first issue of the *Revue internationale de filmologie*, Mario Roques affirms that 'essentially film, as I understand it, is an intention, a will to communicate thoughts and feelings, that is, precisely, a language; for there are not only phonetic languages passing by word of mouth'.

Prior to that, Cohen-Séat had devoted three chapters of his seminal *Essai sur les principes d'une philosophie du cinéma* (first published in 1946) to the question of 'language' or 'discourse' in film, a subject he would take up in an article in the fifth issue of the *Revue internationale de filmologie*. Cohen-Séat’s position towards the problem of cinematic language is beguiling. On the one hand, he affirms a ‘natural brotherhood’ between cinematic expression and verbal expression: the fact that one can make oneself understood in a succession of filmic images appears to justify speaking of film as a language. But on the other hand, Cohen-Séat warns that the tendency to insert new realities (like film) into familiar categories (like ‘language’) can easily lead to deceptive results. Finally, he suggests a pragmatic way of dealing with the analogy:

Reasoning by deliberate analogy has certainly proved successful in some cases. It is easy to predict that the assimilation of filmic events to ‘words’ and the collection of these signs to a linguistic conception of expression will not be achieved without a profound revision of ideas. This is one more reason for its examination.

In ‘Le discours filmique’, Cohen-Séat returns to the question of whether linguistics can be of any direct help in elucidating the nature of filmic communication. He now asserts that the idea of a film language is mistaken, even ‘absurd’, but that this does not mean that speaking of filmic discourse needs to be eliminated as well. To prove that film is not a language, Cohen-

---

27 Mario Roques, ‘Filmology’ [1947], in Filmology [forthcoming].
30 ‘Let us limit ourselves for the moment to the idea that film can be treated like a language. The idea has proved nothing if not seductive; yet this need not, of course, stop it from being
Séat starts from a definition of language (‘any system of conventional signs which can serve to exchange communications between individuals’) and argues that filmic images are not signs, even less conventional ones, that they are naturally the opposite of a system, and that communication is most commonly unidirectional.

Cohen-Séat sees the principal difference in the fact that filmic communication does not rely on any shared knowledge (as verbal language does) and that it is not secondary to anything – in the cinema, ‘the spectator is never informed of something, but by something’. This also implies that meaning is less stable and more open to subjective interpretation.

In a later article, Cohen-Séat compares verbal to filmic discourse in a similar fashion. He again argues for a more direct understanding of meaning in film: ‘Filmed behaviour, before being interpreted in terms of a meaning hidden beneath the moving image, is understood within this same image. There is therefore here no distinction between sign and thing. No more words, no more language.’

Even though Metz would later defend the idea that film is in some ways a language (‘langage’), albeit not in the sense of a system (‘langue’), his comments concerning the differences between film and verbal language are quite close to those uttered by Cohen-Séat. When Metz argues that cinema does not have any equivalent to words, that there is no phenomenological difference between signifier and signified, and that it is indeed hard to define any delimited unit of sense in film, he could have cited the proto-semiotic writings of Cohen-Séat. Also, the idea of using linguistics as a tool of comparison to illuminate the problem of film language could have been taken directly from the inventor of filmology.

The most direct link, however, between writings from the Revue internationale de filmologie and Metz’s own film semiotics, can be found in two essays by Roland Barthes, published in 1960. These articles are absurd. We are going to assure ourselves, carefully, because the affair is important, that film, in its essence, is not, can not be nor can it become a language. We will then assure ourselves that in the study of filmic communication, eliminating the idea of language does not lead to eliminating the idea of discourse.’ Gilbert Cohen-Séat, ‘Le discours filmique’, Revue internationale de filmologie, 5 (1949), 37-48 (p. 39).

31 Cohen-Séat, ‘Le discours filmique’, p. 43.
32 Ibid., p. 44.
relatively little-known and have received little critical attention. Indeed, many articles on Barthes and cinema fail to mention them at all. These articles by Barthes were translated into Italian, published in 1995 under the title *I segni e gli affetti nel film*, with a foreword by Francesco Casetti, and the only article translated into English was published in a specialized university film journal with limited distribution.

This situation provokes a series of hitherto unanswered questions. If we know that Metz read the *Revue* attentively and also that he worked under Barthes’ supervision from 1963 at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, and that he considered Barthes to be his only real teacher, why then do we find practically no references to these articles by Barthes that seem to anticipate the entire problematic of the semiology of the cinema? Why does he refer to texts such as *Mythologies*, ‘Rhetoric of the Image’, ‘The Structuralist Activity’, and others, but (with the exception of one footnote) not to those that deal principally with the semiology of the cinema? Why, in Metz’s early writings, is there no systematic recourse to the issues that Barthes raises?

Before attempting to respond to these questions, I will first outline the principal arguments of these two articles.

‘The Problem of Signification in Cinema’ begins with the statement that if film cannot be defined as a pure semiological field – because it cannot be reduced to a grammar of signs – there is nevertheless a system of signs at work in filmic communication. Barthes qualifies Cohen-Séat’s claim that signs are absent from cinema, seeing the process of signification as subordinate to the more direct form of cinematic communication. Signifying units should first be isolated from the audiovisual flux. According to Barthes, the opening of a film has the greatest density of signifiers because of its heavy

---


37 Roland Barthes, *I segni e gli affetti nel film* (Florence: Vallechì, 1995). I thank Frank Kessler who brought this to my attention.

38 I thank Dana Polan for bringing this to my attention. His translation was published in 1985 as ‘The “Traumatic Units” of Cinema: Research Principles’, *On Film*, 14 (1985), pp. 48-53. New translations by Kate Ince of this and the other essay are about to appear in *Filmology* [forthcoming]. All quotations from these articles by Barthes are sourced from the Ince translation.

explanatory function. If a film recounts the characters’ personalities and ‘backstories’, these are typical signifying moments. Barthes attributes three traits to the filmic signifier. It is 1. heterogenous, because it engages two senses (sight and hearing); 2. doubly polyvalent, because one signifier can express numerous signifieds, and, conversely, a signified can express itself through numerous signifiers; 3. combinatorary, because numerous signifiers can contribute to the creation of a semantic unit. For Barthes, the art of film consists precisely in the elegance with which directors establish and unify different signifiers.\(^40\)

By way of illustration, Barthes studies the collection of signs at the beginning of Claude Chabrol’s film, *Le beau Serge* (F 1958), which he had already reviewed one year earlier.\(^41\) He analyzes the attributes that signify the character traits of the lead role, François Baillou, played by Jean-Claude Brialy, whose clothing ‘contrasted with the clothing of the local peasants’ and signifies ‘young bourgeois’ (Figure 6.1). Indeed, the ‘dandyism in the detail of his clothing’ signifies ‘liberated’, while the ‘adolescent features to his dress’, like the ‘loosely tied scarf’, signify ‘young’ (Figure 6.2). The ‘large books in the room’ and the ‘reading glass’ signify ‘intellectual’ (Figure 6.3). The ‘Swiss label on the suitcase’ signifies ‘former invalid’ (Figure 6.4), and, finally, reading the ‘Cahiers du cinéma over breakfast’ signifies ‘cinephile’.\(^42\)

\(^{40}\) Roland Barthes, ‘The Problem of Signification in Cinema’, trans. by Kate Ince, in *Filmology* [forthcoming]. Before this article, Barthes had touched upon the question of filmic signs in his text ‘The Romans in Film’ (in *Mythologies* [1957], trans. by Annette Lavers [New York: Noonday Press 1972], pp. 24-26), where he treats the ‘fringes’ on the actors’ foreheads as signs of ‘Roman-ness’.

\(^{41}\) Roland Barthes, ‘Cinéma droite et gauche’, in *Œuvres complètes. Tome I. Livres, textes, entretiens 1942–1961* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 943-45. This critique is revealing, for it anticipates Barthes’ notion of the ‘reality effect’ (*effet de réel*), developed nine years later with regards to Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart* and a passage from Jules Michelet’s *History of France*. See Roland Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 141-48. The ‘reality effect’ arises from ‘concrete details’ that have no immediate narrative function – details such as the barometer in *A Simple Heart*, which seem to denote the general category of ‘the real’. Very close to this idea are Barthes’ descriptions of Chabrol’s ‘micro-realism’: ‘In sum, the good in this film is what one might call its micro-realism, the elegance of its choices; Chabrol has a power of *correction*; for example, when the children are playing football on the street, Chabrol knew how to find the essential gestures, those that persuade by using what Chabrol termed “denoting the evident”. Formally, in its descriptive surface, *Le Beau Serge* has a Flaubert-like quality.’ Barthes, ‘Cinema droite et gauche’, p. 944 (emphasis in original).

\(^{42}\) Barthes, ‘Problem of Signification’ [forthcoming].
With respect to the question of the signified in cinema, Barthes reaffirms his conviction that not everything in the film is sign:

The most important problem posed by the filmic signified is: what is signified in film? In other words, to exactly what extent is semiology relevant to film analysis? Film is obviously not made up just of signifieds; film is not an essentially cognitive medium, and in it, signifieds are only episodic, discontinuous, often marginal elements.43

He also offers a definition of the filmic signifier:

The signified is everything outside the film that needs to be actualised in it. If, on the other hand, a reality is entirely contained within the film – invented and created by it – then that reality cannot be the object of signification.44

43 Ibid. (emphasis in original).
44 Ibid. (emphasis in original).
This definition seems to be founded on a notion of the sign as necessarily designating an object that exists only outside the sign itself. In this way, Barthes establishes a conceptual difference between the ‘showing’ (of immediate diegetic realities) and the ‘signifying’ (which implies a reference to diegetic realities that are not shown):

For example, if a film narrates and shows an amorous encounter between two characters, this encounter is experienced directly before the viewer and does not need to be reported, and we are in the order of expression and not signification. If the encounter has taken place outside the film, either before it or between two of its sequences, the viewer can only learn of it via a precise process of signification, which exactly defines the semiological element in film.\(^{45}\)

From this delimitation of the semiotic in cinema, Barthes draws the conclusion that signification can never be central to a sequence, that it always remains marginal. While it is quite possible to imagine sequences that are purely non-signifying, the opposite is not possible: there cannot be, according to this notion, sequences that are purely signifying.

In the second article, entitled “‘Traumatic Unities’ in the Cinema”, Barthes does not appear entirely happy with the answers given in his first article. He reformulates the questions in the following way:

What are the loci, forms and effects of signification in film? More precisely, does everything in film signify, or are there gaps between the elements that do so? What is the nature of the relationship linking filmic signifiers to their signifieds?\(^{46}\)

On this occasion, Barthes refers to Thematic Film Tests (T.F.T. or tests filmiques thématiques) which were used by the Institut de filmologie from 1957. These tests involved making and screening different versions of silent short films so as to study variations in audience reactions. Barthes uses T.F.T. n° 8 as an example, which shows a young man and a mature woman. Spectators are asked their opinions concerning the identity of the two and the nature of their relationship. It is possible to see them as mother and son, as lovers, or as having an ambiguous parental relationship. For

\(^{45}\) Ibid. (emphasis in original).
\(^{46}\) Roland Barthes “‘Traumatic Unities’ in the Cinema: Principles for Research”, trans. by Kate Ince, in Filmology [forthcoming].
Barthes, the events presented subsequently become *signs* when and if they gradually communicate information about the status of the relationship. In this manner it appeared possible to first determine the signifieds. Then one had to find the signifiers that cause meaning to differ. Barthes compares two versions of T.F.T. n° 8, which contain the variation of the look that the young man gives the lady, which is prolonged in the second version and thereby changes the signified: in the second version, the relationship between the two appears clearly amorous.

Barthes deduces the following pattern:

![Diagram from Barthes, “Les ‘unités traumatiques’”, p. 20](image)

The look [*regard*] itself is not meaningful; the meaning lies in its length [*durée*], either short or long. From this example, Barthes reconstructs a signifying unit analogous to the morpheme in natural languages. The object of this procedure is ‘to compile a reasoned inventory of film signs’. He defines this as a dual task of semiological research:

\[\text{T}h\text{e inventory of signifying unities has to be established, which is essentially a task of delimitation in which the film is cut into as many layers as there are distinct signifieds; next, these signifying unities have to be compared to one another (without referring further to the chain of images) then grouped into sets of oppositions, the play between which engenders their meaning.}\]

47 Ibid.
Yet this research programme was never realized, not by Barthes, not by Metz, nor indeed by anyone else. The only research experiments of which I am aware that tend in this direction were made within a completely different theoretical framework, that of cognitive psychology.48

If one compares this research programme of Barthes’ with Metz’s early writings from 1964 to 1966, it would appear that something like an epistemological break must have taken place. Metz is not at all bothered with an inventory of filmic signs. Indeed, what is most astonishing is that Metz hardly ever discusses the idea of filmic signs and even less tries to define or categorize them. He even seems to abandon the search from the outset when he states in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ that there are no delimitable signs in cinema, because the ‘signifier is coextensive with the whole of the signified’.49 Later, in Language and Cinema, Metz openly declares himself hostile to the idea that it may be possible to find ‘a single sign or a single cinematic type of articulation’, which would be ‘of nearly stable and more or less familiar size’ and which would also, ‘like the morpheme, […] necessarily be segmental’.50 The idea of the cinematic sign seems to him ‘doubly dangerous: from the perspective of the internal development of semiotic research, and from that of the public debate with its adversaries’.51

Metz never tried to establish an inventory of filmic signs or to search for elementary signifying units. Even the idea that there are signifying and non-signifying elements to be distinguished in the audiovisual flux does not seep into his semiotics.

Hence my hypothesis that if Barthes’ filmological articles had an impact on the development of Metz’s thought, this appears only ex negativo. This is to say that it seems to me that Metz felt that Barthes’ programme was not accomplishable and that this saved him a detour. Rather than looking to define cinematic signs, he deduced the specificity of cinematic language from the impossibility of doing so. This allowed him to concentrate on questions concerning the syntagmatic and, later, in Language and Cinema, to develop the principle of the theoretical predominance of code (or codes) over minimal units

48 In Germany, for instance, by Peter Ohler and Gerhild Nieding, two researchers who have often worked with slightly different versions of short films to test audience reactions and variations in cognition: Peter Ohler, Kognitive Filmspsychologie: Verarbeitung und mentale Repräsentation narrativer Filme (Münster: MAkS, 1994); Peter Ohler and Gerhild Nieding, ‘Kognitive Filmspsychologie zwischen 1990 und 2000’, in Film und Psychologie – nach der kognitiven Phase? (Marburg: Schüren, 2002), pp. 9-40.
50 Metz, Language and Cinema, p. 205.
51 Ibid., p. 206.
(or ‘signs’). To put it differently: where Barthes had looked for signifying units in the content of filmic images (the length of a glance from one character to another, for example), Metz is more concerned with the form of cinema’s matter of expression and the different ways in which one shot may relate to another.

And yet, this new approach is in fact what Barthes suggests in a 1963 interview with the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma*. Three years after the publication of his filmological articles – of which he makes absolutely no mention in the interview – Barthes appears to offer a negative assessment of them himself: ‘For myself, it’s probably because I have not succeeded in integrating the cinema within the sphere of language that I consume it in a purely projective manner, and not as an analyst.’52 But in the same interview, Barthes confirms the usefulness of a semiology of the cinema: ‘All this seems to prove that there are possibilities of exchange between linguistics and film, providing you choose a linguistics of the syntagm rather than of the sign.’53 It is quite possible that Barthes had already read a first draft of Metz’s ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ at this point. In any case, he indeed anticipates the work that Metz would accomplish on the syntagmatic axis of filmic signification in the 1960s, especially the renowned ‘grand syntagmatique’.54

To conclude briefly, it is possible to identify three areas where filmology’s influence on Metz has played out: the epistemological distance that filmology deliberately introduced with respect to cinematic culture, the technical terms that certain filmologists had invented, and, finally, the semiological reflections in the writings of Cohen-Séat and Barthes. The importance of the last-mentioned for the genealogy of Metz’s theory is less evident because, as I have tried to show, they are indeed relevant only in that they suggest an approach that Metz would not follow; an approach from which he would distance himself so as to develop his own version of the semiology of the cinema – and with the success for which he is today remembered. Of course, this does not mean that we necessarily have to agree with Metz’s scepticism towards the notion of filmic signs. Whether we need to postulate signs and, if so, how to conceptualize them, can be left open to further debate within the semiotics of cinema.

*Translated from French by Anthony Cordingley*

53 Barthes, ‘On Film’, p. 18.
About the author

Guido Kirsten is a postdoc researcher at Stockholm University. He obtained his doctorate in 2012 from the University of Zurich. In 2013, his thesis was published under the title Filmischer Realismus. He is co-editor of the German film and television studies journal montage AV (since 2007), for which he organized thematic issues on André Bazin (2009), filmology and the sociology of cinema (2010), film and politics (together with Chris Tedjasukmana and Julia Zutavern; 2014), and Roland Barthes’ cinema-related writings (2015). With Karl Sierek, he edited the anthology Das chinesische Kino nach der Kulturrevolution (2011). Together with Kate Ince and Vinzenz Hediger, he co-edited the forthcoming Filmology and the Origins of Film Studies. Selected Writings from the Revue international de filmologie.

About the translator

Anthony Cordingley is Maître de Conférences in English and Translation at the Université Paris 8, Vincennes-Saint-Denis. He publishes on twentieth-century literature, translation, and philosophy, and especially on the works of Samuel Beckett.