Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

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Questions of Form and Aesthetics
7. Christian Metz and Aesthetics

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Abstract

Critics of semiology, and of Christian Metz's work in particular, often alleged that he was not a cinephile, that he had no interest in films (since he hardly ever analyzed a film), and that semiologists like Metz were putting aside everything that made cinema an art and a source of aesthetic pleasure. In short, Metz was frequently attacked for being indifferent to film as an aesthetic artefact. This chapter seeks to develop a more nuanced view by examining the place that the aesthetic occupies in Metz's intellectual trajectory as well as its links with semiology. This place can be divided, broadly speaking at least, into three 'sites' between which the aesthetic moves: expressiveness, stylistics, and poetics.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, film aesthetics, filmology, film phenomenology, cinematic expressiveness, cinephilia

Amongst the least-explored themes in discussions of Christian Metz's work are all those that could be categorized, generally speaking, as pertaining to the 'aesthetic'.¹ There are several reasons for this. First, Metz's writings themselves, marked from the outset by the structuralist and semiological²

¹ By 'aesthetic' here, I mean issues concerned with art, including what is sometimes labeled under stylistics and poetics. One exception, however, is Dominique Chateau's 1993 article, 'Une contribution de Christian Metz à l'esthétique: autour du thème de l'hallucination paradoxale'', Les cahiers du CIRCAV, 6-7 (1993), pp. 65-76.

² Throughout this paper I shall avoid using the term 'semiotics' and instead use 'semiology' as a translation for the French 'sémiologie'. Two reasons explain this choice: 1) in English, 'semiotics' is used in reference to the tradition inaugurated by American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (though Peirce rarely used 'semiotics', preferring instead 'semiotic', 'semeiotic', 'semeiotics', or even 'semoetic' to translate Locke's semiotikè). Since this tradition differs in profound ways from that inaugurated by Saussure, who used the term 'sémiologie', it seems appropriate to signal the distinction; 2) in structuralist circles in France, 'sémiologie' was used by authors such as Metz...
quest for ‘cinematic language’ and its specificity, appear to resolutely turn their back on everything that might be described as criticism, embracing instead what ought best be called theory. In this regard, Metz was somewhat like the filmologists who preceded him and who provided part of the inspiration for his doctoral dissertation proposal in 1961 at the Sorbonne entitled ‘Cinéma et langage’ (‘Cinema and Language’). Then came the introduction of psychoanalysis. Here, Metz’s most enduring work has been on the concept of the ‘dispositif’ and, in his own terms, not the psychological study of individual films but rather the relations between psychoanalysis and the cinematic situation, ‘with the mirror stage, with the infinity of desire, with the voyeuristic position, with the ebb and flow of disavowal’ helping to grasp the unconscious of the cinematic institution, ‘imprinted’, as it were, in the viewer’s psyche as a code. Then, finally, there was the return to structuralist linguistics with his book L’énonciation impersonnelle, ou le site du film. It is true that in Metz’s writings the idea that cinema might be an art or even an art-in-the-making, one to be defended against its detractors – an overriding theme in so-called ‘classical’ film theory, from Münsterberg to Mitry by way of Freeburg, Arnheim, Bazin, Balázs, Kracauer, and many others – largely shifts over to the idea of cinema as something akin to a language, of cinema as logomorphic. We thus find in Metz no defence and illustration of how cinema functions as an art or of its artistic value. And yet, as momentous a shift as this may have been, I shall endeavour to

or Barthes and it came to distinguish their work from that of A.J. Greimas who used the term ‘sémiotique’ which then became associated with Greimassian semiotics.


4 The expression belongs to Metz, who uses it in a document accompanying his application to become Directeur d’Etudes at l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in October 1975: ‘It is the cinematographic institution [l’institution cinématographique] itself (for it truly is an institution, as the theatre was in classical Greece), it is this historically and socially new fact, which is a never-before-seen signifier [signifiant inédit] (an ‘audio-visual’ signifier), which can, it appears to me, be productively enlightened by Freud’s discoveries. Institutions also have their own unconscious which is ‘imprinted’ [imprimé] in the (socially conditioned) psyche of each of its users, which is to say, in the case of cinema, the spectator: this equally pertains to the ‘code’, the object of study of semiotics.’ Christian Metz, ms. CM1227. Programme d’enseignement et de recherche, accompanied by a letter dated 9 October 1975 to Jacques Le Goff, president of the EHESS at the time. All manuscripts cited in this article come from the Fonds Christian Metz of the Bibliothèque du film (BiFi) in Paris. Reference to them will use the current manuscript number. English translations are ours. The Fonds has not been catalogued and was not available to the public at the time of writing this essay. I wish to thank the estate of Christian Metz for granting me access to archival materials and to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada who made possible consulting the Fonds at BiFi.
show that the break with aesthetics signalled by Metz's semiology was not as thorough or absolute as it has often been made out to be. My aim here, therefore, is to examine what in Metz's project belongs to the aesthetic or originates from it.

This shift, from cinema as ‘art’ to cinema as ‘language’, it turns out, was not perfectly smooth as far as film scholarship is concerned. Those who resisted the move saw it for what it was, namely nothing short of an attempt to realign the study of cinema and reposition it in the epistemic field: moving it from the domain of art and aesthetics, where it had often been pigeonholed at the hands of primarily self-taught authors (self-taught at least as far as cinema was concerned, certainly), to that of semiology, a domain for which linguistics served as the ‘guiding’ science (‘science pilote’ was the set phrase to characterize linguistics’ ties with semiology during the 1960s). There, in true Saussurian spirit, the study of film would fall under the general rubric of social psychology.5 To generalize somewhat, we might say that this project, riding the structuralist wave that was at the time spreading wildly and with remarkable success throughout the humanities and social sciences, managed, if only for a brief moment, to carry through the rift initially created in France by the filmology movement between an academic discourse on cinema (and sometimes on films) and an aesthetic-critical (and sometimes historicist) discourse on films. While the Institut de filmologie had succeeded in carving out a small niche for itself in the university through its connection with the Sorbonne in the 1950s,6 it was in large measure with Metz, despite the relatively peripheral position he occupied – if only with respect to the university – in the sixth section of l’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes [EPHE] (which in 1975 became l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales [EHESS]) that film studies definitively took up a place in higher education in France, leading semiology to hold sway for a few years as the dominant discourse in the discipline. We must acknowledge that, beyond the impact of his publications and research, Metz also found himself shaping film studies by either supervising the research or sitting on the dissertation committees of practically an entire generation of future French academics, not counting the numerous foreigners who

5 Let us recall that the linguistic sign for Saussure is a two-faced entity, both sides of which are psychological: the signified which is a concept (and therefore a res mentis) and the signifier which is a sound-image (‘image acoustique’), described by Saussure as the psychical imprint of a sound. The union of the two entities is arbitrary and social.

6 On this topic, see my article ‘L’aventure filmologique: documents et jalons d’une histoire institutionnelle’, Cinémas, 19/2-3 (2009), pp. 59-100.
studied under him. And, as was the case with filmology, a number of voices were raised, some in France and many abroad, criticizing what they saw as the inordinate wish in Metz’s work to render abstract and to formalize as well as the lack of any proper aesthetic consideration toward film art, individual films, or the pleasures they afford. Thus Sam Rhodie, in an article dating from 1975, reported the attacks by the British critic Robin Wood before he, too, embraced certain structuralist principles:

A year ago, at a seminar at the British Film Institute centering on the work of Christian Metz and on cinesemiotics, a well-known critic spoke. Robin Wood found Metz insufficiently concrete, too concerned with abstract proposals, instead of with the actual analysis of ‘real’ films. Wood himself has repeatedly stressed the organic quality of specific films — the singularity of the body of the text. ‘What does all this have to do with films?’ Wood wanted to know. The suspicion was that he knew already in the very insistence of his demand to know what the ‘pay-off’ was, what the ‘returns’ of this theorizing were. Could it be ‘used’, ‘exploited’ in filmic analysis?

It is true that prior to the publication of L’énonciation impersonnelle in 1991, Metz’s writings mention very few films. In this, also, he was following the example of the filmologists: not a single film title was so much as mentioned in Gilbert Cohen-Séat’s Essai sur les principes d’une philosophie du cinéma in 1946. Metz drew on this volume, adopting in Language and Cinema, with a few minor modifications, its distinction between cinematic (cinématographique) and filmic. In short, Metz was condemned in certain quarters for not being a cinephile, for having no interest in films, and for putting aside everything that made cinema an art and a source of aesthetic pleasure. Those making such reproaches were perhaps unaware that Metz had co-directed and led discussions at the ciné-clubs of Lycée Henri IV in Béziers and then Lycée Henri IV in Paris, and then finally at that of Ecole Normale Supérieure on rue d’Ulm between 1947 and 1953, when post-war cinephilia in France was in full swing. Or, that he had briefly been Georges Sadoul’s assistant in 1955-56, just after finishing his Master’s degree in Greek and his agrégation in classical literature (Lettres classiques). They

7 See in particular the acerbic criticism levelled against filmology by André Bazin (under his pseudonym Florent Kirsch) in the pages of Cahiers du cinéma: ‘Introduction à une filmologie de la filmologie’, Cahiers du cinéma, 5 (September 1951), pp. 33-38.

8 Sam Rohdie, ‘Metz and Film Semiotics: Opening the Field’, Jump Cut, 7 (1975), 22-24 (p. 22).
were also undoubtedly unaware that Metz wrote long screening notes for himself on the thousands of films he viewed at the cinema, on videocassette, or on television. These were, of course, intended to jog his memory, but in them one can also find indications of his taste and expressions of his cinephilia: on Wim Wenders’ *Alice in the Cities* (FRG 1974) for example, he writes: ‘the film is very dull, slow, dragged out[,] the dead moments are overwrought, and not just anybody can make themselves Antonioni, here the dead moments are really dead; we are gently bored to death, without violence.’ Then, unexpectedly, he adds: ‘curiously, this very set of “faults” creates a kind of personal touch, or personal style; it’s true that this doesn’t resemble anything else, that it has a real tone. But we will have to wait for his maturity for this tone to be linked with something solid. Here it remains very adolescent.’ Metz also expresses in these notes his admiration for films as different as Steven Spielberg’s *Duel* (USA 1971), struck as he was by the ‘remarkable […] pure virtuosity’ and ‘astounding’ ‘science of camera angles on the two vehicles;’ or Robert Bresson’s *The Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne* (F 1944) which he describes quite simply as ‘sublime,’ noting its ‘minimal, stripped-down compositions, yet well-marked and strongly set apart from one another visually’ and commenting that ‘everything is realistic, though it doesn’t seem so [because] the stylization transfigures everything, thanks to the resolutely literary dialogue (even though it is minimal and very simple), the diction (not yet “blank” but already very sober and stately) [and] the plain elegance of the image.’

Beyond such anecdotes and lists of personal favourites, however, what interests me most of all here is the place that the aesthetic occupies in Metz’s intellectual trajectory as well as its links with semiology. This place can be divided, broadly speaking at least, into three ‘sites’ between which the aesthetic moves: expressiveness, stylistics, and poetics.

1 Expressiveness

Elsewhere I have had the opportunity, along with Dominique Chateau, to demonstrate how Metz’s notion of expressiveness is organized around a phenomenological strain which, in his earliest writings, had a certain degree of difficulty in distinguishing itself from the perspective provided

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9 Metz, ms. CM0023.
10 Metz, ms. CM0229.
11 Metz, ms. CM0197.
by semiology.” In fact, it is possible to view a good many of Metz’s writings, from ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ to The Imaginary Signifier, as an attempt to bring semiology and phenomenology into dialogue. Before June 1967, however, the date of the Pesaro conference where he met Umberto Eco, this dialogue was such that it is difficult to distinguish, if one considers solely what the image shows (the purely ‘visual-recording’ aspect of cinema), where the phenomenological search for meaning ends and where the semiological analysis of cinematic signification, properly speaking, begins. At the centre of this ambiguity lies the problem of the analogical nature of photo-filmic imagery and its relation with expressiveness – both that of the world and that of art.

In his early work, Metz was deeply influenced by Mikel Dufrenne, and especially by his book The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, as his copious reading notes on it demonstrate. Metz actually reprised passages from these notes in his great programmatic article ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’. It was from Dufrenne, moreover, that he borrowed the concept of expression understood as a properly phenomenological dimension of meaning. Dufrenne proposed to distinguish between representation or signification – which is what ordinary language does when it is used to denote – and expression, whether natural or artistic, as in the case of poetry. ‘The work of art’, Dufrenne explains, ‘says something directly – something beyond its intelligible meaning – and reveals a certain affective quality which may not be easy to translate but can nevertheless be experienced distinctly. Does not a particular painting, even if it has no subject, express the tragic, just as a piece of music expresses tenderness or a particular poem anguish or serenity?’ It follows for Dufrenne that it is the expressivity of an object or work of art (i.e., its ability to make us aesthetically aware of a certain quality) and not representation or signification (i.e., its ability to stand in for a thing or a concept) that gives rise to the aesthetic dimension, whatever the object or work. In short, representation, which is synonymous here with signification and denotation, is not a necessary or sufficient condition of the aesthetic.

For Metz, who in his early writings followed Dufrenne in this regard, expression in art is the meaning offered directly to us via a medium but beyond what is represented, which is to say beyond the manifest denoted

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content or signification of the work. In a set of ‘answer sheets’ (corrigé) prepared for literature students at CUDES\textsuperscript{14} in 1965, Metz wrote:

\begin{figure}
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\caption{Typescript; Fonds Christian Metz, Bibliothèque du film, Paris: ms. CM5000, p. 3}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{14} The Centre universitaire d’enseignement supérieur, whose director was the philosopher Denis Huijsman, was a ‘boîte à bac’, as these were sometimes called, i.e., a private institution where one went to do a ‘bachotage’, a period of intensive training to prepare lycée students to pass their baccalauréat exams.
Words, constantly manipulated by ‘the tribe’ – by all of us – with the sole, purely utilitarian goal of making ourselves understood on a daily basis, can also be acted upon by a subtler alchemy, rendering them expressive and making them resemble to a certain extent the things they designate. This is the very goal of literature and is what distinguishes it from everyday language.15

What is interesting in these study notes, for the purpose at hand at least, is how they attest, in the early writings of Metz, to the persistence of an aesthetic conception of literature that first appeared in print a year earlier in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ and against which, by contrast, he placed the cinema. This conception, inspired by Dufrenne’s work, can be summarized as follows: in the arts founded on representation (or on signification), as is the case with literature, whose material is the language system (la langue), the aesthetic dimension lies in the expressive ability of a work to deliver ‘content’ other than the mere denoted signification. With respect to such a linguistic-based object, this ‘alchemy of words’ implies a curious development, however, in that it consists in making expressive a material that originally was in no way expressive because, as linguistic theory overwhelmingly maintains – from Aristotle to Saussure – there exists a complete ‘divorce’ between words and things. For Metz, the issue with respect to literature thus consists in ‘reconciling discourse and the world’, that is to say, in recovering the meaning of the world through language. But how is this ‘alchemy’ to be achieved? In ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, the credit for bringing verbal language into the realm of art, into the ‘world expressed’, falls to connotation. The CUDES answer sheets, for their part, filled in additional details by specifying three paths along which the work of literature – in particular the work of literary style – can be carried out: by employing the sonorous quality of words; by resorting to images (meaning tropes and figures such as metaphor or comparison); and finally by grouping words together into sentences. (I will return to these latter two further on.) Through the work of style, literature can render or evoke the world – it can create, in Metz’s words, ‘profound agreement […] between words and things’ and ‘render sensible a certain quality [of the world]’.16

These ideas sum up the properly aesthetic section of ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ (entitled ‘Cinema and Literature: The Problem of

15 Christian Metz, Corrigé no. 1, Français littéraire, ‘Poésie des mots et pouvoir des mots’, ms. CM5000, p. 3 (Figure 7.1).
Filmic Expressiveness'), where Metz explains that, as representational arts, ‘literature and cinema are by nature condemned to connotation, because denotation always comes before their artistic endeavour’. He goes on to explain that ‘[i]n the final analysis it is by the wealth of its connotations that Proust’s great novel can be distinguished – in [semiological] terms – from a cookbook, or a film by Visconti from a medical documentary’.17

This similarity between literature and cinema, however, is only partial; Metz’s aim, among other things, is to better identify the difference between the two art forms on the semiological and phenomenological fronts. This difference, he explains in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, is that, in literature, representation, or denotation, is founded on the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, while in cinema, at least with respect to the photographic dimension of the image, it is founded on analogy. Metz sums this up in the following way: ‘literature is an art of heterogeneous connotation (expressive connotation added to non-expressive denotation) while the cinema is an art of homogeneous connotation (expressive connotation added to expressive denotation)’.18 One of cinema’s specificities is thus its ability to render the world directly with its own expressivity, apart from any artistic labour. For the natural expressiveness of the world is that through which the latter speaks to us, touches us, has meaning for us — even though the world itself isn’t a sign, a representation. We recognize in this a central theme of the phenomenology of cinema as it was developed by numerous French authors who preceded Metz, including Merleau-Ponty, Bazin, and Mitry. At the same time, the idea that cinematic art qua art must possess its own expressiveness beyond and above that which belongs to the world as it is denoted by the image is in line with that other central theme of ‘classical’ film theory, to the effect that what distinguishes the filmic image from the ‘world’ is what gives cinema its artistic potential. For Metz, therefore, cinema as an art form possesses a dual expressiveness: ‘aesthetic expressiveness is grafted onto natural expressiveness – that of the landscape or face the film shows us’ in such a way that in film ‘[o]ne is forever shifting from art to non-art, and vice-versa. The beauty of the film is governed to some extent by the same laws as the beauty of the filmed spectacle: in some cases it is impossible to tell which of the two is beautiful and which of the two is ugly.’19

19 Ibid., p. 77 and 82.
We should note two consequences of this conception. First, it upsets any too-hasty association, in the case of cinema, between denotation and signification as well as between connotation and expression because it is only on the aesthetic level proper to art that connotation and expression are inseparable. This undoubtedly explains why Metz thought – as he emphasizes, in particular in his 1966 article on ‘The Modern Cinema and Narrativity’ – that it was an almost categorical error, one Bazin and others had made, to derive a normative aesthetic or an *ars poetica* from the cinema’s peculiar denotative-phenomenological relation with the world. Second, and to the extent to which, as Dufrenne maintains, expression gives a phenomenological dimension of meaning which must be distinguished from the semiological dimension, which is founded on a code, we can see how this conception blurs the boundaries – in the very heart of denotation, i.e., the most fundamental semiological zone – between meaning and signification, phenomenology and semiology. With respect to the above, too little attention has perhaps been paid to Metz’s argument in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ (despite the fact that this argument is famous and often commented upon) for the *almost phrastic* status of the shot in cinema. In film, Metz maintained, ‘[a] close-up of a revolver does not mean “revolver” (a purely virtual lexical unit), but at the very least, and without speaking of the connotations, it signifies “Here is a revolver!”’

This is why, for Metz, ‘the shot [which is like] a “sentence” and not a word [...] is indeed the smallest “poetic” entity’. While the filmic/linguistic dimension of this distinction has been widely glossed over, it seems to me that commentators have not sufficiently underscored the use of the term ‘poetic’ in this passage. In his answer sheets prepared for students at CUDES, Metz explains what distinguishes the sentence (as a literary and poetic unit) from the word (as a linguistic unit):

>[A] book is not a list of words. While it is true [...] that each word is unconnected to what it signifies, it remains that the choice and ordering of words in sentences confers upon the latter something like a unique and living *countenance*, different each time, or like a singular respiration which can maintain secret ‘relations’ with the tangible features of the real event that the sentence sets out to evoke.²²

²⁰ Ibid., p. 67.
²¹ Ibid., p. 66 (my emphasis).
²² Metz, ‘Poésie des mots’, ms. CM5000, p. 5 (Figure 7.2).
Then, taking up a description by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of a landscape near Chambéry in Book IV of the *Confessions*, he explains:

How did the writer manage to make at least some parts of the landscape *pass into his sentences*? Words as they are found in a dictionary were of no help to him: on their own, the terms ‘river,’ ‘undergrowth,’ ‘parapet’ etc. [...] evoke only vague and general images. [...] But Rousseau chose to order these words in such a way that they give precision to one another,
and the expressivity found in neither is, in the end, found in their sum: strange mathematics! Yet this is one of the most general principles – even though it remains implicit – of any poetic, novelistic or simply descriptive enterprise.\textsuperscript{23}

With the shot ‘naturally’ and automatically carrying out what the sentence is capable of accomplishing in literature, the filmic image inherently pertains to the expressive register proper to the aesthetic, even if this is not yet sufficient to create an art form in the strict sense (art being just one dimension of the aesthetic: a sunset may offer an aesthetic experience but it is not art). ‘Film’, Metz remarks, ‘is immediately and automatically situated on the plane of \textit{rhetoric} and \textit{poetics}.\textsuperscript{24}

Of course, Metz never systematically examined the cinematic means by which film becomes an art and expresses itself aesthetically through connotation.\textsuperscript{25} But this does not mean that he was insensitive to such questions, as can be seen in particular in his comments on a scene from Grigoriy Aleksandrov and Sergei Eisenstein’s \textit{¡Qué viva México!} (USA/MEX 1930) in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ or in some of his personal film-viewing notes. In the former, Metz wrote:

In Eisenstein’s \textit{Que Viva Mexico}, there is a famous shot of the tortured, yet peaceful faces of three peons buried to their shoulders being trampled by the horses of their oppressors. It is a beautiful triangular composition, a well-known trademark of the great director. The denotative relationship yields a signifier (three faces) and a [signified] (they have suffered, they are dead). This is the ‘subject,’ the ‘story’. There is natural expressiveness: suffering is read on the peons’ faces, death in their motionlessness. Over this is superimposed the connotative relationship, which is the beginning

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Christian Metz, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, p. 81 (my emphasis).
\item \textsuperscript{25} Nevertheless, in a text from 1966, ‘Some Points in the [Semiology] of Cinema’, he remarks: ‘[T]he art of film is located on the same semiological plane as literary art: the properly aesthetic orderings and constraints – versification, composition and tropes in the first case; framing, camera movements and light “effects” in the second – serve as the connoted instance, which is superimposed over the denoted meaning. In literature, the latter appears as the purely linguistic signification, which is linked, in the employed idiom, to the units used by the author. In the cinema, it is represented by the literal (that is, perceptual) meaning of the spectacle reproduced in the image, or of the sounds duplicated by the sound-track.’ Metz, in \textit{Film Language}, 92-107 (p. 96). Among the signifieds of connotation mentioned by Metz, one finds literary or cinematic style; genre (epics, Westerns); symbols (whether philosophical, humanitarian, or ideological); and the poetic atmosphere of a work.
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of art: the nobility of the landscape as it is structured by the triangle of the faces (form of the image) expresses what the author, by means of his style, wanted it to 'say': the greatness of the Mexican people, his certainty of their eventual victory, a kind of passion in that man from the North for all that sunny splendor. Therefore, aesthetic expressiveness. And yet still 'natural': the strong and savage grandeur rises very directly out of the plastic composition that turns suffering into beauty. Nevertheless, two language systems exist side by side in this image, since one can identify two signifiers: (1) three faces in a barren stretch of land; (2) the landscape given a triangular shape by the faces – and two [signifieds] – (1) suffering and death; (2) grandeur and triumph.26

In the case of Metz’s personal viewing notes, we find there, as we did in his discussion of Rousseau’s Chambéry landscape and Eisenstein’s Mexican landscape, a sensitivity towards what art – in this case cinematic art, in films of very different styles – succeeds in rendering, expressing or evoking of the sensible world, of faces, bodies, and places. Of Sylvester Stallone’s Staying Alive (USA 1983), for example, he writes: ‘John Travolta [is] magnificent with his primitive ambition, vulgarity and peevish intensity = breathtaking presence.’ He then adds with respect to the cinematography: ‘the film is punctuated by solitary walks in New York (= magnificent cinematography of skyscrapers, Central Park, tall buildings seen from the Brooklyn Bridge, etc. […] it is one of the finest films on New York there is.’27 Regarding the ‘studio jungle’ in W. S. Van Dyke’s Tarzan the Ape Man (USA 1932) he writes that it ‘is much more powerful than any documentary jungle or jungle shot on location, precisely because what it evokes directly is childhood imagination’, meaning that the film ‘brings back to life with astounding sureness all the myths and adventure books of childhood, all the more so in that the studio jungle and set can be seen as such and are more reminiscent of drawn illustrations in books, such as those by Jules Verne.’28 A final example: Max Ophüls’ Letter from an Unknown Woman (USA 1948), about which he notes that ‘it is a complete masterpiece […] like a great novel’ (du grand romanesque), that its black-and-white photography is ‘marvellous’, and that ‘Vienna around 1900 is evoked in a very poetic and very novelistic

26 Metz, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, pp. 79-80. For a different version of this passage as first written in Metz’s notes on Dufrenne’s The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, see Chateau and Lefebvre, ‘Dance and Fetish’.
27 Metz, ms. CM0756, p. 44-45.
28 Metz, ms. CM0657.
manner, with corners of narrow streets in the rain, a fountain, the corner of a building, cobbled streets and especially the horse-drawn carriages, three steps leading to a house, the style of furniture and the decked-out uniforms of the dignitaries and officers of the Empire in its twilight years.29

The ‘vulgarity’ and ‘peevish intensity’ of John Travolta in *Staying Alive*, the evocation of ‘childhood imagination’ with Tarzan’s studio jungle, and the ‘novelistic’ depiction of the Belle Epoque in Ophüls’ film are all, for Metz, the work of connotation. In other words, they are affective qualities which belong to a realm of aesthetic meaning that the cinema can express without, however, denoting it (which is not to say that denotation isn’t germane to such connoted qualities).

Naturally, between his thoughts on *¡Qué viva Mexico!* and those on Stallone’s film twenty years later, Metz greatly shifted his theoretical frame of reference, particularly with respect to phenomenology, as I have demonstrated elsewhere.30 I will not go over this demonstration again here except to emphasize that the phenomenological conception of expression, understood as a ‘natural’ and uncoded manifestation of meaning, disappeared from Metz’s work after 1967, when he adopted a pan-semiological approach in which the arbitrary nature of the code reigned supreme, including, of course, over connotation. And yet, beyond any epistemological consideration, this semiological radicalization was in the end of little consequence because it was a case not so much of denying phenomenology as it was of looking behind it, or under it, for the cultural codes that it is otherwise too ‘naïve’ to recognize, whether for lack of scientific rigour or because of an absence of reflexivity, even as it is able to grasp their effects. From that point on, phenomenology for Metz took up a complementary and no longer competitive role alongside semiology and psychoanalysis, whose combined task it was to exhibit the codes – including the connotative codes – which preside over our grasping the affective qualities and impressions that cinema and films provide and which can by turns be a source of aesthetic pleasure or displeasure. This is why the phenomenological perspective, which first appeared with Metz’s early thoughts on aesthetics, never entirely disappeared from his work. That said, both semiology and psychology increasingly began to take on a ‘counter-cinephilic’ aspect for him, their common goal being to lay bare the codes presiding over cinematic desire and thereby over the pleasures that films can provide.

29 Metz, ms. CM0398.
30 See Chateau and Lefebvre, ‘Dance and Fetish’.
In addition, in one of the few essays after ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ in which Metz directly took on the relation between semiology and aesthetics – a talk from May 1971 entitled ‘Existe-il une approche sémiologique de l’esthétique?’ (‘Is There a Semiological Approach to Aesthetics?’), which he reprised in his seminar in 1972-73 – Metz laid stress on the idea that the only aesthetic that semiology could ever endorse, beyond the structural study of the greatest possible number of aesthetic objects (i.e., objects intended to be judged for their aesthetic value) from diverse cultures and periods in the hope of ‘brotherly openness toward aesthetic alterity’, would be ‘an aesthetic of cultural illegitimation and unaccomplishment of desire’.31 Like psychoanalysis which – to the extent that its object is repression and deceit – is oriented ‘against psychic functioning, out of the patient’s assertions, but against them’, semiology works against the cultural functioning of codes, against their naturalization (‘against the clear conscience of the code’, Metz remarks):32

Every film in actual fact puts into play primary processes (such as condensation and displacement), but normally they remain unnoticed (by the filmmaker and audience alike). And this is why (see Lyotard) they can be led to wish fulfillment [accomplir le désir; Wunscherfüllung] (a hallucinatory fulfillment of desire, not a true fulfillment of it). It is clear, however, that a broader semiology would continue to a certain point a film that would take as its subject, as its aim, the analytical exhibition of the way in which condensation and displacement operate. But in this very act this film would inevitably be deceptive and would mobilize one’s defences. Desire would find there its unaccomplishment (except to the extent that a part of libidinal energy would really move over to a desire to unmask, a desire to know, meaning in the end a voyeurism that accepts itself as such, an attitude that would be at once perversion and its opposite. Establishing such an economy in each of us, however, is no simple matter.)33

Clearly, this entire discussion on pleasure and perversion ought to be situated in the context of Metz’s later work on enunciation, to which I will return later. For now, suffice it to point out that, during the same year, in an essay

31 Metz, ms. CM1436. This manuscript was recently published in 1895, Revue de l’Association française de recherche sur l’histoire du cinéma, 70 (2013), 154-67 (p. 164) (Figures 7.3 & 7.4).
33 Ibid., p. 167 (emphasis in original).
he wrote on special effects and trucages, Metz moved to distinguish plainly between two kinds of pleasure afforded by the cinema: the pleasure derived from the diegesis (on the side of which one finds invisible special effects) and that derived from the ‘cinematic machine’, closer to enunciation (where the trick effect or trucage, identified and recognized as such, functions as an admired tour de force in filmmaking).\textsuperscript{34} It would be fair to say that, for the most

part, Metz came down on the side of the former of these two pleasures (the pleasure afforded by the diegesis, the *romanesque* in film), if only indirectly and by means of theoretical discourse. For although he never truly sought to back one aesthetic school over another, a great deal of his theoretical work is at once founded on and supportive of (you cannot have one without the other) a conception of cinema or, better yet, of *cinematicity*, understood as an affective quality and source of filmic pleasure. It is a single common conception that runs through the various stages of his work all the way up to
L’énonciation impersonnelle and which, in essence, can be summed up by the cinema’s special hold on the viewer, by the power that emerges from a very particular regime of presence and absence, by virtue of which cinema stands apart from other media or art forms and gives rise to both the impression of reality (this is the early Metz) and the phenomena of spectatorial identification with and belonging to the film’s novelistic fiction (this is the Metz of The Imaginary Signifier). It is this conception that manifests itself more privately in his comments on Tarzan and the evocative power of its studio jungle, and quite publicly (and theoretically) in this famous statement in The Imaginary Signifier: ‘Every film is a fiction film.’ It is equally the same conception in the piece he wrote in honour of Emile Benveniste, ‘Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism),’ about which he later said that it was ‘an almost lyrical article, in any event a personal expression, a piece of Hollywood film criticism while being at the same time an almost loving paean to this cinema, with which my entire cinephiliac side was smitten’.37

Such is also one of the themes in the opening essay of The Imaginary Signifier as it investigates the object relation that binds the semiologist to the film texts he analyzes and studies, cinephiliac pleasure in this case being both an object of study and what the analysis (the analyst?) represses, to varying degrees. In some respects, The Imaginary Signifier is the theory itself of this repression. Looking at Metz’s work, it now seems obvious that it is aesthetic discourse, as it emerged in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, that becomes more or less repressed, more or less displaced in the movement that leads all the way to L’énonciation impersonnelle.38 And yet, as we have already seen above, aesthetic concerns never truly disappear from Metz’s work. Rather, they are displaced and work subterraneously. Is that not, moreover, the way the repressed functions?

2 Stylistics

‘The semiology of cinema’, Metz wrote in 1966, ‘can be conceived of either as a semiology of connotation or as a semiology of denotation.’39 Nevertheless,

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35 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 44.
36 Ibid., pp. 89-98.
38 In this final book of Metz’s, new traces of cinephilia emerge, ones more connected this time with the pleasures associated with the ‘cinema machine’ and enunciation than those associated with the diegesis. See also the essay by Dana Polan in this volume.
apart from a few articles, including two that were openly phenomenological, each concerning a central aspect of Metz’s conception of ‘cinematicity’ (viz., the impression of reality and narrativity)\(^\text{40}\), what mostly drew his attention, until his psychoanalytical turn in the mid-1970s, were problems of denotation. Methodologically, this choice was justified by the fact that, in keeping with the tradition inaugurated by Louis Hjelmslev and to which Metz subscribed, relative to denotation, connotation is a second-order signification and therefore incapable of being understood without the former. It thus appears quite appropriate to proceed with a discussion of denotation first. For while art can cope with signification (in Dufrenne’s sense of the term), its goal is to go beyond it and thereby by definition to go beyond what, for Metz, is specific to cinema (cinematic denotation, and even more specifically, its denotational signifier). In Hjelmslev’s model, both elements of denotation (signified and signifier) serve as connotation’s signifier; for this reason, connotation cannot be a purely cinematic entity, as its own signifier goes beyond the medium-specific domain of film language alone. Indeed, because it includes the non-specifically cinematic signified of filmic denotation, the signifier of filmic connotation also includes the extra-cinematic domains of culture and symbolism associated with the denoted objects and situations.\(^\text{41}\) Film art is thus superimposed on a complex multi-coded system containing several articulated strata.

In a presentation he made in A.J. Greimas’s seminar at the EPHE in November 1967 entitled ‘Les articulations au cinéma’ (The Articulations of Cinema),\(^\text{42}\) Metz laid out five major levels of articulation which, in tandem with perceptive analogy regarding the first three of these, provide the means for understanding a film. First, there is space as an intelligible structure which we ‘read’ in culturally and historically determined ways. While this is not a code in the strict sense, Metz explains, it is nevertheless a coherent and organized system that conveys meaning (in the 1968 version of

\(^{40}\) The two articles are ‘On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema’ [1965] and ‘Notes Toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative’ [1966], both found in Metz, *Film Language*, pp. 3-15 and 16-28 respectively.


\(^{42}\) Christian Metz, ‘Les articulations du cinéma’, ms. CM1447. Part of this talk, namely the distinction of five levels of articulations or codifications, was added as a footnote to the 1968 re-edition of ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System’ for the first volume of *Essais sur la signification au Cinema* (Paris: Klincksieck 1968), p. 67, note 2. In English, see the footnote that begins on p. 61 of *Film Language*. The same five ‘types of systems’ (catégories de systèmes), as they are later called, also find their way in *Language and Cinema*, pp. 33-34.
this taxonomy, Metz will refer to it, more broadly, as the ‘perceptual level’). Next there is the identification of objects, or the iconological system through which what is filmed yields its ‘literal’ sense and becomes recognizable/identifiable. Third, there is the symbolization of objects, meaning the ensemble of significations that the presence of objects on the screen can evoke or connote and which are iconographical in nature. Fourth is the narrative system, which calls upon our knowledge of how and why people act the way they do. All these strata of meaning are strictly extra-cinematic and are founded on knowledge acquired culturally (through cultural codes). It is only with the fifth stratum that, properly speaking, cinema intervenes through cinematic language, seen by Metz as a true *meta-cultural* system whose signifying task consists in ordering the cultural material of the preceding levels into a *filmic discourse* in such a way as to yield a diegetic universe as the signified of denotation. In one sense, what Metz calls cinematic language – that ensemble of codes and sub-codes described in *Language and Cinema* – is quite clearly distinct from verbal language because of the cultural ‘position’ it occupies, more after than before culture (i.e., verbal language *forges* culture and meaning, whereas cinematic language comes *after* and piggybacks on culture). As Metz emphasizes in his 1967 presentation, to understand cinema,

one must have understood a host of other things. It is a *meta-cultural* language which presupposes that one possesses, first of all, the basic culture of one’s group. [...] This also explains why it may be very difficult to understand a film, whereas learning filmic* [cinematic] language itself is relatively easy. For the basic units in a film are non-filmic [non-cinematic] (only their ordering is filmic [cinematic]).

The situation is almost the opposite for verbal language, Metz adds, because ‘it is through the learning of a language that we learn everything else’. He concludes: ‘this is why it is correct to say that cinema is an *art* more than it is a language – or at least that it is through its artistic effort that it becomes, in addition, a language – for, like all arts, it is the conclusion of a culture and not, like all languages, the beginning.”

43 This talk was written before the publication of *Language and Cinema*, when Metz had evidently not yet incorporated into his work the distinction between filmic and cinematic.


45 Ibid.
As we can see, Metz’s semiology, even as it refrains from critical value judgements, does not go so far as to dismiss the aesthetic. This may appear surprising if we consider his views on denotation and cinematic language. But it must be understood that study of the latter is a methodological prolegomena to the study of the cinema as art, as writing (écriture),\(^{46}\) because it is an attempt to grasp the conditions which make cinematic art possible. In one sense, it would be possible to read the filmo-semiological project, which reached completion in Language and Cinema, as entirely directed towards the study of filmic writing without ever completely succeeding, somewhat in the manner of an asymptote. Consequently, in a later version of his presentation in Greimas’s seminar, Metz added a sixth stratum,\(^{47}\) which he named film stylistics and which became ‘textual analysis’ in Language and Cinema. Its role, Metz explains, ‘is to study how the five [preceding] strata combine on the level of the individual film, which is to say, more precisely, to bring out the general choices whose particular manifestation (échéance) (or particular combination thereof) appears in a given film’.\(^{48}\) In the written version of a talk on connotation dating from after 1971 – thus after the publication of Language and Cinema – Metz wrote: ‘the textual analysis of films is wholly the study of connotation. The same is true of the psychoanalytical perspective and the study of ideology.’\(^{49}\)

Thus the film – a singular object that cannot be generalized, the site of the emergence of aesthetic qualities and subject to aesthetic judgement of pleasure or displeasure – becomes the finality of cinematic language! What we thought we had driven out one door comes back through another! Metz more or less implicitly admits this, moreover, in the final chapter of Language and Cinema, when he realizes that the division in cinema between what plays a role analogous to Saussure’s langue – that is, cinematic language – and its artistic use as writing (in Barthes’ sense of écriture) ‘does not pass between general codes and sub-codes’.\(^{50}\) First, Metz recognizes that it was by developing its denotation strategies that the cinema became an art; what distinguished one strategy from another – shooting a scene in a long take versus using editing, for example – is chiefly a question of connotation (in both cases, denotation – the diegesis – is

\(^{46}\) See Chapter 11 and the Conclusion of Language and Cinema.

\(^{47}\) This version dates from February 1969 and was presented at the Centre audio-visuel de Saint-Cloud. It is included in CM1447.


\(^{49}\) Christian Metz, ‘Exposé ou conférence sur la connotation’ (Presentation of Conference on Connotation), ms. CM1448, p. 12.

\(^{50}\) Metz, Language and Cinema, p. 270.
the same; the difference lies in what they connote). The cinema is not an art because it denotes but because beyond the analogy of denotation it calls for choices, the differences between which form a manner or style or genre, even on the level of general codes. The same general code can thus serve both to denote and to connote, which is to say that it can serve both the langue function of the initial (more or less ‘literal’) understanding or intelligibility of a film and the second-order writing function (i.e., the connotative dimension of ideological and aesthetic choices). In his notes for a talk on connotation, mentioned above, Metz observes: ‘In the cinema, practically every code is a connotation code, with the exception of: 1) iconic analogy; 2) editing, in part.’

This, moreover, is the sense of the comment quoted above, to the effect that it is through its artistic effort that cinema becomes a language. Second, the reverse trajectory also exists: in the cinema, initial/literal understanding or intelligibility normally associated with the langue function, and thus with general codes, sometimes mobilizes major sub-codes normally associated with the writing function (precisely because they are not general). This, for Metz, is the case with the grande syntagmatique, to the extent that it serves the first intelligibility of temporal relations in the film at the same time as it ‘marks – and in so doing returns to a state of writing – a certain era of cinema, a certain face of cinematicity (the one to which we give the name “classical découpage”).’

In the cinema’, Metz concludes, ‘that which serves as a langue has certain characteristics of a writing, and [that which serves as] writings certain functions of a langue.’

Thus Language and Cinema bears within it a somewhat unacknowledged stylistic (and thus aesthetic) project whose foundations it nonetheless clearly lays. The project isn’t fully acknowledged because it isn’t really carried out in the book, nor, for that matter, even foregrounded. And yet the endeavour cannot be overlooked. Its importance can be measured with

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51 Metz, ‘Exposé ou conférence sur la connotation’, ms. CM1448, p. 11.
52 Ibid. In his notes for his 1990-91 seminar, Metz comments: ‘The cinema [compared to literature] had more difficulty, and historically took some time to achieve the novelistic malleability of time which enabled it to take over from the great classical novel (19th C.), which in the meantime had been exhausted and had moved on to a reflection on writing (Joyce, Nouveau Roman, Oulipo, etc.). This is the somewhat laborious evolution, the continuation of a sentimental education, which I wished to demonstrate in my grande syntagmatique – how the editing together of shots creates a supple, manoeuvrable, living, affectivized, novelistic space-time.’ Metz, ms. CM1507d, p. 14. Note that ms. 1507 is made up of four texts. In order, they are: a) a version from the 1970s; b) a revised version in English written in 1982; c) a much longer version for the 1990-91 seminar; and d) a later text synthesizing version (c).
53 Metz, Language and Cinema, p. 271.
respect to the distinction Metz continuously made, ever since ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, between verbal *la langue* and cinematic language, despite what unites them. Indeed, as we have just seen, a key distinguishing factor between the two – whether we are dealing with the natural expressivity of the film image (the ‘semiological-phenomenological’ approach) or with strata of articulations and the impossibility of making clear distinctions, on the level of the code, between denotation and connotation (the ‘semiological-cultural’ approach) – is the idea that meaning, as established by *la langue*, always precedes cinema.\(^{54}\) This explains why in Metz the cinema is, to a degree, always already art (it is first art, then language: a logomorphic *art*, not an artistic *language*), and why in *Language and Cinema* the aesthetic dimension (through issues concerning style, genre, writing, and other affective qualities) is brought back in, precisely where one thought it had been driven out – viz., in the denotation codes – even though Metz is at pains to separate the semiology of denotation (which concerns language) and the semiology of connotation (which concerns art and forms of expressivity).

3 Poetics

A third aesthetic *topos* in Metz concerns *poetics*. Once again, as we shall see, the original impulse is given by ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ and its comparison of cinema with literature.

Psychoanalysis provided Metz with an opportunity to look back, critically and reflexively, on a number of themes in his early work, such as the impression of reality and phenomenology. It also enabled him, through the pairing metaphor/metonymy, to take up the topic of non-literal signification – second-order or symbolic signification – something common to both connotation and rhetorical figures, in addition to the field of the Freudian unconscious. The chapter of *The Imaginary Signifier* devoted to these questions, ‘Metaphor/Metonymy, or the Imaginary Referent’, was the only previously unpublished text in the volume when it appeared in French in 1977.\(^{55}\) It alone takes up more than half of the monograph. Metz presents

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\(^{54}\) To employ the terminology used by the Russian semioticians of the Tartu school (Lotman, Ouspenski, Ivanov), we could say that what Metz recognizes from the outset is that verbal language is a *primary modelling system*, while cinematic language is a *secondary modelling system*.

\(^{55}\) The source for the piece was an extra section written for the essay entitled ‘Le signifiant imaginaire’ initially published in *Communications*, 23 (1975), pp. 3-55. Upon advice from the two
it as the product of a different concern than the other chapters, one less focused on the institution’s ‘dispositif’ because, he said, the question taken up ‘directly concerns the filmic text’. From the outset, he is closer to the very ground (the film as text) that his earlier work had sought to avoid.

Language and Cinema, as we have seen, ends with the imbrication of connotation and denotation in cinema. ‘Metaphor/Metonymy, or the Imaginary Referent’ reformulates this question in Freudian terms in order to inquire into the ‘particular overlapping of primary and secondary’ processes in cinema. Here a large part of the work consists in unravelling the tangled theoretical connections between a series of conceptual pairs – metaphor and metonymy, of course, but also paradigm and syntagm and condensation and displacement – by calling in turn on three disciplines: rhetoric, linguistics, and psychoanalysis. In a handwritten manuscript, dating from 1978, for a talk at the University of California Berkeley, Metz provided this very succinct explanation of his project:

Apply psychoanalysis to the film text’s great processes of signification, to its internal linkages, its logic.
On this point, classical semiology (because of its highly secondarized model = linguistics) had a weakness = it studied the coded parts of the film well, but it was a little inadequate in the face of more emergent, more nascent constructions.
Precisely, however, for these constructions the Freudian theory of primary process (= condensation, displacement) and the Jakobson-Lacanian homology with deep rhetoric (metaphorical process, metonymical process) help considerably: they show that, even when there is no code, there are typical trajectories (= associations).

It is thus a matter of describing how in films there emerge, through rhetorical/poetic-type operations, meaning effects that are not planned or determined by the codes of cinematic denotation whose task is to ensure the initial/literal intelligibility of the film. Already in his CUDES corrigé,

other editors of the issue, Raymond Bellour and Thierry Kuntzel, Metz removed this section from what was already a long essay, and developed it further for his book.
56 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 152.
57 Ibid., p. 163. Recall that for Freud, primary processes characterize unconscious thought, where ideas are connected through displacement and condensation, as in dreams, while secondary processes are present in conscious and rational thought.
58 Metz, ms. 1435, p. 2.
which we discussed earlier, Metz had zeroed in on the use of metaphors, metonymies, and other rhetorical figures for their expressive and evocative power in literary art: ‘if figures are expressive, if they let us touch with our finger a small corner of sensuous reality, it is because they play on the splitting (dédoublement) of meaning. [...] And to split is to augment: through figures, words succeed in going beyond and signifying more than themselves, in resembling the world.59

Since time immemorial, the rhetorical figures of metaphor and metonymy have always played a significant role in carving poetic language and literary art. In the cinema, however, the situation is somewhat more complicated, as we shall see. We might speculate that this is one reason why Metz’s early writings place the aesthetic dimension as a whole under the sign (rather vague, there is no denying) of connotation, without addressing rhetorical questions. It remains that under the rubric of structuralism, rhetorical figures and connotation have clear affinities. In addition, before going any further, we should first of all recognize how connotation can have something in common with metaphor and metonymy, beginning with the definition of it provided by Hjelmslev and its liberal appropriation later on by Roland Barthes.

For Hjelmslev, connotation has to do with levels of language, stylistic form (prose, verse, etc.), style (creative style, normal style), register (vulgar, formal, etc.), media (written language, speech), idiom, tone, etc. Any given use of language will connote either a vernacular, literary, or oratorical style, or a tone such as anger or joy. In each case, the connection between connotation’s signifier and signified is marked by inclusion or contiguity (such as the way a novelistic style connoted by a novel is, in some respects, co-extensive with it), something that does not elude Greimas and Courtés, who explain in their dictionary that connotation is related to metonymy.60 With Barthes, however, connotation takes on new meaning.61 As Metz notes, ‘Barthes was the one who generalized [connotation], and he was right,’ adding that its ‘scope is quite vast: every phenomena such as an artist’s “style,” the

59 Metz, ‘Poésie des mots’, ms. CM5000, p. 3.
60 ‘From a semantic perspective, connotation could be interpreted as the establishment of a relation among one or more semes located on a surface level and the semene to which they belong, which must be read at a deeper level. Their connotation is akin to metonymy, the well-known rhetorical figure.’ A.J. Greimas and Joseph Courtés, Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary, trans. by Larry Crist and others (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982 [1979]), p. 53.
so-called “aesthetic” dimension, all ideological discourse, every form of rhetoric. He continues: “[I]t’s the idea that language always says more than it appears to, that it is run through and worked on from top to bottom by social forces, and that literal meaning (which today we call denotation) is never the sole meaning of the message. [I]t’s an open door onto ideological and psychoanalytical study.” For Barthes, the reader will recall, connotation is ‘the way into [...] polysemy’. But by opening up to every meaning effect unregulated by linguistic convention, it is no longer contiguity alone that serves as the basis of connotation but also every connection involving comparability or resemblance, which is to say every relation associated with metaphor.

This subtle slippage between connotation and rhetorical figurativity is all the more important if, like Metz, one seeks to minimize the properly rhetorical dimension of second-order meaning with the goal of highlighting, in its place, operations common to the work of the unconscious (condensation/displacement) and to the structuring of units of langue (selection [paradigm]/combination [syntagm]). Because, from the perspective of rhetoric alone, distinguishing between figures of speech and connotation is a simple enough task: only metaphor and metonymy require a dual substitution, namely in the positional axis of discourse (the order of words) and in the semantic axis of reference. In the case of metaphor, for example, one term takes the place of another in such a way that the referent of the absent term – absent but nevertheless ‘felt’ – is represented under the guise offered by the referent of the present term for which it is substituting. The entire operation is made possible by a qualitative relation (resemblance or comparability) between the two referents. Connotation, for its part, also evokes a second-order meaning, one absent from denotation but which tends to join up with the initial, first-order meaning of the present term rather than driving it out, as is the case with metaphor.

Metz, however, is intent on distancing himself from an exaggeratedly strict (or ‘by-the-book’) understanding of rhetoric, whose usefulness to cinema, to be sure, would be too narrow. The reason is that the substitutive figures of rhetoric, taken literally, hardly occur in films, at least in the dominant realist mode. For as the members of Groupe μ point out, the problem with pictorial metaphor (in the strict, substitutive, rhetorical sense) is that ‘it is easier with verbal language to suspend overly concrete

62 Metz, ‘Exposé ou conférence sur la connotation,’ ms. CM1448, p. 11.
63 Ibid., p. 9.
Metz’s strategy, in this light, consists in liberating the figural from its rhetorical yokes by turning to the contributions of Jakobsonian linguistics (paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations) and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis (primary processes: condensation and displacement) in order to bring out the underlying principles, the deep structure of semantic operations of a metaphorical or metonymical kind but which do not necessarily result in actual metaphors or metonymies in the strict sense of classical rhetoric. These principles, general in scope, are based on comparability and contiguity and apply to verbal discourse, the unconscious, and the cinema alike. In particular, the Freudian description of primary processes enables Metz to let go of discursive substitution as a defining criterion for the ‘figures’ in this ‘expanded’ rhetoric. In the case of metaphor, for example, it is a matter of taking as one’s model work done on oneiric condensation (with which it has been associated since Lacan) and noting that it admits of the co-presence (rather than the substitution) of the figuring and the figured in the dream. Condensation, furthermore, unlike the metaphor of classical rhetoric strictly conceived, which is too deeply secondarized, is related to connotation. Indeed, Metz remarks that condensation is the analogue of the linguistic polysemy studied by those interested in connotation, in the ‘affective nuance’ of words and in poetic creation, in the way it actualizes ‘several distinct “valencies” around one manifest element’, which analysis has the task of bringing to light. This overlapping of the figural and the connotative is most clearly brought out in a passage in which Metz analyzes the famous monocle in Battleship Potemkin:

In The Battleship Potemkin the Tsarist doctor’s pince-nez – momentarily immobilised and, so to speak, kept from falling into the sea by the insistent gaze of the close-up (as well as the ropes in which it is entangled), ‘caught’ by the camera when its owner has just dropped it (there is a hint of a negative metaphor, a ‘contrast’) – the pince-nez conjures up in the spectator the representation of the doctor himself (that is why it is there): synecdoche. But in the preceding images we saw the doctor wearing the pince-nez: metonymy. The pince-nez connotes the aristocracy: metaphor. But it can do so only because the nobility – outside the diegesis, in the

65 ‘One can undoubtedly praise a young person’s “swan-like neck”, but a painter who depicts this person with the long white neck of this winged creature would achieve the opposite effect.’ Groupe μ, Traité du signe visuel: Pour une rhétorique de l’image (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 274.
66 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 238.
society of the time: another level of the ‘referent’ – liked to wear pince-nez: metonymy again. And so it goes on.67

There is thus imbrication of the metaphorical and the metonymical but also of the figural and the connotative, the polysemous, the oneiric, and the poetic. It is this imbrication that Metz seeks to grasp all at once in the movement of the film itself, in the ordering of its immeasurable parts and fragments, in the subterranean meanings contained in this very ordering, as it constantly brings into relation various elements more or less pregnant with symbolic trajectories ready to take shape and emerge. These subterranean meanings exist below and beyond the code (both as source of coded secondarizing and as what exceeds the code), where language, ideology, the unconscious, and art meet and overlap. Here we see the culmination of an idea found in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ which I quoted above, according to which ‘film is immediately and automatically situated on the plane of rhetoric and poetics’ (my emphasis).

That said, am I right to think that in this magic square of meaning (which brings together language, ideology, the unconscious, and art), it is above all art, and in particular film art (or better yet film as art) which, for Metz, dominates as a kind of purpose or causa finalis? After all, most of the films called upon to assist him in his demonstration are recognized masterpieces and favourites of classical art house cinephilia – Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (SU 1925) and October (SU 1928), Fritz Lang’s M (GER 1931), Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane (USA 1941), Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times (USA 1936) – and in each case the wealth of symbolic trajectories is highlighted. Yet, be that as it may, Metz also brings up examples of standardized (i.e. heavily secondarized) and routine or banal (at least nowadays) ‘figurations’, including ‘images of flames in the place of a love scene’,68 as well as crosscutting and dissolves. The fact of the matter, then, is that Metz seems to carefully avoid distinguishing, as far as cinema is concerned, between obvious examples of artistic usage and the unconscious- and language-based foundations of the figural which are manifested by every dream, every speech act, every film. But why avoid such distinction? It isn’t really a paradox, however. Indeed, in this regard, Metz’s position is not unlike that of Julia Kristeva, to whom he moreover does not hesitate to refer when he stresses that ‘ordinary language, as Julia Kristeva has so

67 Ibid., p. 200 (my emphasis).
68 Ibid., p. 189.
often emphasised, is a temporarily depoeticised and limited subset of more basic symbolisations which resemble those of poetic language’. Poetic language for Kristeva is connected to that which precedes language, the archaic pre-language of the infant which eventually turns into language, with the idea that everyday speech comes to repress the poetic – though it is still present in speech. But to apply any such a conception to cinema, is this not to recognize from the outset, for just about any shot or any edited sequence, a true poetical power (latent or not, repressed or not), a true artistic potentiality and force equal to that of poetry – equal to that which poetry or literary art liberates though it is present in all forms of language? Indeed, if Metz once more approaches cinema like a language, if one can transfer onto cinematic discourse the figural (poetic) source/origin of language (what Kristeva calls the semiotic), is it not in the end to underscore above all its always present, though sometimes latent, poetic dimension, the very product of its orderings and trajectories, out of which cinematic art can emerge? Behind every image, every shot, every editing sequence – just as behind every word – a boundless associativity is woven: by privileging a given symbolic trajectory at any given moment (as examples from Modern Times or October illustrate) and leaving others latent (they never disappear and can always resurface), what emerges from this network, for Metz, is the figural. To the question ‘Why privilege this or that trajectory and not another?’, Metz offers the following reply which, with the return of the concept of expressivity, squarely places art and the unconscious side by side: ‘Linguists know that a lexical formation or a phrase catches on by virtue of its “expressiveness” rather than by its logic […] and the notion of expressiveness takes us straight into those kind of harmonics which, if one only follows them up far enough, lead to the unconscious.’

The final aspect of poetics on which Metz worked concerns what is sometimes referred to as ‘genre theory’ in literary scholarship but for which he, like his friend Gérard Genette, preferred the term ‘modal theory’ (théorie des modes). His final book, L’énonciation impersonnelle, grew out of this work, but he began exploring the topic long before writing the book and continued to work on it after its publication in 1991, namely in his 1990-91 seminar and then in his final conference paper, ‘Le Cinéma et les formes du dire’ (Cinema and the Forms of Speech), on 13 January 1993. Metz himself described this research as a comparative aesthetic and semiological project. He gave an

69 Ibid., p. 161.
70 Ibid., p. 164-65.
initial version of this talk, under the title ‘Le Cinéma classique entre roman, théâtre et poésie’, in 1974 in Florence and Parma and then in São Paulo in 1975 and Caracas in 1978. In 1979, a Spanish-language version was published in the Venezuelan magazine Video-Forum, and in 1982, during a sojourn in Australia, he gave a different version in English before developing further the same comparative approach in the 1990s. In this context, L’énonciation impersonnelle appears to be a kind of outgrowth, or even a kind of narrow magnification of a broader aesthetic-semiotic argument initially developed fifteen years earlier.

What interests Metz here is the theoretical and enunciative conditions under which the cinema historically succeeded in overcoming, in part, its natural dramatic (or monstrative) vocation in order to develop its epic (or narrative) capabilities. This transformation, in his view, enabled classical cinema to blossom and then to take on the cultural role that literature had played in the nineteenth century: that of a veritable school of life which ‘formed or deformed lifestyles, styles of affectivity and models of seduction and cheekiness’. In the notes for his final seminar before his retirement, we find a long, remarkable passage (which recalls Edgar Morin in Les Stars) in which Metz lists aspects of this socio-cultural contribution on the part of (mostly) classical cinema:

From Ava Gardner young girls learned to be sumptuous, from Louise Brooks how to do their hair, from Marlene Dietrich to be tough-yet-womanly and to have legs. From Gary Cooper's westerns boys learned that people were impressed by the slow, silent type and from the young Gabin they learned how to roll their eyes. With Edwidge Feuillère, and later Danielle Darrieux, women saw how one becomes a duchess, a prefect’s wife or the wife of a minister. French ‘poetic realism’ told everyone what a ‘man of the people’ is like = he’s like Carette, Bussière or Gaston Modot. From James Dean, we know how to charm girls by acting the child or looking sulky. With Marlon Brando, we make people think we have the phallus. With musical comedies, we learn to dream in gaudy Technicolor and without embarrassment. With film noir we see ourselves as tough guys with a crooked smile (Bogey), bitter yet courageous and good. Westerns teach us sober camaraderie between men without affectation, and beyond that contempt for women. Breathless [Jean-Luc Godard, F

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72 Christian Metz, ‘El cine clásico entre el teatro, la novela y el poema’, Video-Forum, 4 (1979), pp. 7-17.
73 Christian Metz, ms. CM1507c, pp. 51-52 (Figures 7.5 & 7.6).
1960] was a lesson in modernity for an entire generation, just as Marilyn Monroe, for the men of a certain time, was a prototype of the desirable body (with a deliberate coefficient of ironic exaggeration in this case, as with Jane Russell and Jane Mansfield). Tyrone Power revealed that D’Artagnan is not dead. Gaby Morlay consoles ugly women by reminding them of the many roles left for them. And what can be said about Greta Garbo, who unleashed an incredible social (and literary) phenomenon? In sum, in classical films, as in classical novels, there is something addressed to adolescents, to those learning about life, who want to change it, whatever the age of the hero or the audience, something that suggests to us ways in which to adjust our bodies and our hearts.74

On the level of structural factors, the existence of this initiatory function of classical cinema, Metz explains, is made possible by the blossoming of a composite enunciative regime marked by the introduction of novelistic elements into a material that was in the beginning closer to theatre. For whether it shows or tells, if the cinema is an art it is equally a discourse – this is the notion of ‘logomorphic art’ which is at the very heart of Metz’s thought75 – and as such it can only call upon the three logical and timeless modes of discourse, upon the three modes of enunciation or forms of speech, described by the Greeks: the dramatic, the epic, and the lyric.76 While it is rare for these forms to appear in a pure state – in the theatre, for example, there are epic enclaves when a chorus appears; in novels, there are dramatic enclaves when characters speak directly; etc. – Metz believed that the cinema, in its classical period, had succeeded in removing itself from the dominance of the dramatic and in developing a previously unseen hybrid form through a new enunciative configuration. By combining the dramatic and the epic, he said, the cinema created ‘one of the most complex and engaging forms of telling that exists’.77 In one sense, we might see this relation between the two principal enunciative modes, first discussed by

74 Metz, ms. CM1507c, pp. 51-52.
75 “Film”, Metz writes, “merits more than the other arts the name “discourse”. It enables developments, resumptions (reprises), arguments, gradual transformations, anaphora, demonstrations (= didactic-scientific films) and, of course, narratives […]” Metz, ms. CM1507d, p. 2.
76 The Greek theory of modes recognized in the first place two great forms of telling: either we are ‘given’ a scene, which unfolds on its own – this is the dramatic mode in which the ‘telling’ imitates the world (Plato’s mimesis) – or we are told the scene as it unfolds – this is the epic mode (diegesis). As for the lyric mode, it pertains to the epic, but no longer concerns fiction: here the real world is the subject but as seen through the subjectivity of a speaker.
77 Metz, ms. CM1507d, p. 11.
Metz as early as 1974, as somehow prefiguring (albeit in a substantially different form, of course) the distinction made famous by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault in the mid-1980s between the cinema of attractions (marked by the ‘dramatic’ quality of *showing*) and narrative cinema (marked by the ‘epic’ quality of *telling*).\(^7^8\) Metz, for his part, recognized that cinema's

\(^7^8\) For Gunning, it is *monstration* (which for Metz pertains to the dramatic mode) which defines the cinema of attractions: ‘What precisely is the cinema of attraction? First it is a cinema that bases itself on the quality that Léger celebrated: its ability to *show* something. Contrasted to the voyeuristic aspect of narrative cinema analysed by Christian Metz, this is an exhibitionist...
cinema.’ Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde’, Wide Angle, 8/3-4 (1986), 63-70 (p. 64). Of course, one could also, from another perspective, trace the attraction/narration distinction back to Bazin and his antithesis between filmmakers who believe in reality (the avatar of the dramatic: the world is revealed, the ‘telling’ is imitative) and filmmakers who believe in the image (the avatar of the epic: the world does not reveal itself on its own, it is ‘told’; a telling agent is felt, perceptible – this is Laffay’s ‘great image-maker’ [grand imagier] – and it organizes for us the material it yields up). Metz also anticipated in part André Gaudreault’s thesis on cinema’s combination of the textual and the theatrical, despite Gaudreault’s rereading of the Greek concepts mimesis and diegesis. See André Gaudreault, From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema, trans. by Timothy Barnard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009 [1988]).
particular enunciativa form (combination of dramatic and epic) was in no way inevitable, that this was in no way some sort of essence of cinema. He wrote:

For the past ten years or so now, although most films remain novelistic and there subsist reportages, didactic films, etc., a new possibility is taking shape (under the influence of the video clip and the TV commercial, of hip advertising), a cinema that is distancing itself somewhat from both literature and the theatre in favour of imagery or thundering fireworks = Beineix, Besson, sometimes even Carax, Bertrand Blier, certain films by Coppola, *Star Wars*, James Cameron, Ridley Scott, Zemeckis, etc. These are images the way children see them: flat, gaudy, attractive surface.\(^7^9\)

For the novelistic to take up a place in cinema, spectators must sense that they are being told a story – even as they seek paradoxically to forget this fact in order to better enjoy the film and its imaginary world. This story, Metz says, can only emanate from ‘a non-character agent, a primary, impersonal (and temporarily manifest) enunciation [whose presence] shifts the entire diegesis into a different gear’.\(^8^0\) The term ‘impersonal enunciation’, a kind of oxymoron if one holds to pure classical modes (which imply an entirely ‘theoretical’ purity, without empirical existence), in fact demonstrates the hybridity of the novelistic in the cinema. This hybridity, moreover, accounts for why it is a simple matter to see enunciation practically everywhere in films or, on the contrary, to diegetize (viz., to see as diegetic) so many of the enunciative traces left in a film narrative. Metz sums up his position as follows: ‘on the one hand, the most run-of-the-mill film reveals the enunciative agent in every fade to black, every somewhat abrupt change of shot, in the credit sequence itself [...] on the other hand, all that does not prevent a powerful, vital, imaginary world from taking shape, into which we transfer and which makes us more or less forget its fabricated nature’.\(^8^1\) In his book on enunciation, Metz examines a dozen or so enunciative figures, all of which contribute to the cinema’s novelistic and epic status because they enable a ‘meta-discursive’ reading of what is seen and heard.

Alongside these figures, however, are those traits that distance the cinema from the most purely dramatic form of theatre: commentary,

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\(^7^9\) Metz, ms. CM1507d, p. 29.
\(^8^0\) Metz, ms. CM1507c, p. 34.
\(^8^1\) Metz, ms. CM1509, p. 4.
intertitles, live spoken accompaniment, optical/special effects, etc. In other words, everything that contributes to cinema’s *narrative impression* – the impression that we are being *told* something above and beyond the pure dramatic monstration found in a medium that gives us something to see and hear. In his 1990-91 seminar, moreover, Metz added supplementary marks of the epic mode. These include sequences without characters, facial expressions, and everything to do with human beings’ relation with their surroundings. In the first case, Metz remarks that the presence in cinema of natural landscapes and animals but also of urban landscapes, automobiles, aerial combat, etc. – in short, the presence of all the world’s furnishings, whether real or imaginary – distances the cinema from the theatre and brings it closer to what can be read in novels. In these moments without actors, without dialogue ‘is conveyed the impression [...] that things can happen without characters and thus without speech’.

Which is to say that in the cinema, contrary to theatre, ‘the story can take form somewhere other than in the characters’ mouths, in a series of images from an exterior source, which thus have a narrative quality even though they are not words = images, yes, but which *recount*.’ With respect to facial expressions, Metz observes that in the cinema, unlike the theatre, ‘they can be as varied and “natural” as in novels’. Finally, he explains, the theatre is ill equipped to examine the relation between people and their surroundings: we have the impression of seeing real people (because of the real presence of actors) moving about on a mere ‘set’ and not in a world. In the cinema, on the other hand, the homogeneity of the setting and the character makes possible ‘fine-grained and detailed analyses [...] of the relations between people and their surroundings’.

In addition, Metz emphasizes, ‘in both films and novels it is not a case of “a character on stage or set (décor)” but of a unique and encompassing picture presenting itself more or less forcefully as a complete world containing things, people, animals, etc. = the *world-effect*.’ Metz could just as easily have taken up here the *impression of reality*, which never ceased to be a profound part of his conception of cinema. But if this world-effect is possible – if Metz, *at first sight somewhat counter-intuitively but in the end quite logically*, compares the face in cinema with that in the novel rather than with that in the real world – it is because in the

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82 Metz, ms. CM1507c, p. 38.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., p. 40.
86 Ibid., p. 41.
cinema the world is made of *images*. This means that imitation in cinema is heterogeneous to what it imitates (it is hetero-semiotic: the world itself is not made of images), while in theatre it is homogeneous, the world imitating the world, real speech and gestures imitating real speech and gestures (it is homo-semiotic). There is thus in cinema, at the very heart of the mimetic relation, a degree of heterogeneity, a gap that favours the introduction of the epic or novelistic dimension. In the end, it is because both novel and film, contrary to theatre, cannot offer us the real world that they can create one that seems so complete, even if it is imaginary.

Consequently, epic marks can at times serve the fiction while at others be seen to act as meta-discursive traces of the film’s impersonal enunciation, meaning that they contribute to the impression of narrativity which makes it possible to assert that *only in the cinema* can one see the landscapes found in Westerns or the expressions on Falconetti’s face (i.e., through them, and countless other such examples, one may become meta-discursively aware that one is watching a film): what ensures our immersion into the film world is also what ensures its separation from the world as discourse and as that which is specifically cinematic. Béla Balázs, to mention only him, was therefore not mistaken with respect to the close-up.

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Having now reached the conclusion of this essay, is it at all surprising that we should find here, once more, notwithstanding a few shifts in perspective, some of the same issues and aesthetic objects with which we began? These include the relation between words (but also images) and things; the ability of an art (literature, theatre, cinema) to evoke a world; the importance of the landscape and the face in cinema (at times as marks of expressivity and at others as marks of epic discourse and meta-discursive/enunciative traces); etc. One need only recall the various quotations I have provided from Metz’s film viewing notes – on Travolta and New York in *Staying Alive*, on Tarzan’s fake jungle and the imaginary, on turn-of-the century Vienna and the novelistic in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* – to see solid confirmation of this. Moreover, when these quotations are considered alongside everything else that has been discussed above, we can perhaps get a brief glimpse of what might have resembled a Metzian cinematic *ars poetica*. In any event, we see a clear and remarkable unity stretching over a period of more than twenty-five years of theoretical labour, despite variations in the angle of attack and conceptual swings. And we might well wonder what this unity is an indication (or symptom) of, if not first and foremost an aesthetic conception of cinema. We
know that Metz has been accused over and over of wishing to turn cinema into a branch of linguistics and of abdicating every kind of aesthetic concern regarding it. As we have seen, however, nothing could be further from the truth. For never did Metz’s project discount the aesthetic; on the contrary, as I have tried to demonstrate, it thrived on it, the aesthetic having a constant subterranean presence in his work, partially buried by and yet informing that other parallel and more visible continuity, one more professed on the surface and more ‘scientific’: the theme of language. These are the two threads which meet in the fundamental idea championed by Metz, that of the cinema as a logomorphic art. The last word will go to Metz himself, taken from the conclusion of the final manuscript in his archives and summing up quite well his work as a whole and what he tried to grasp in his own way. It is on the basis of this statement than we can render final judgement on his œuvre: ‘aesthetics is not logic per se, but there is a logic to aesthetics’.87

Translated from French by Timothy Barnard

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Timothy Barnard is the translator of volumes on film theory by Jacques Aumont, André Bazin, André Gaudreault, and Jean-Luc Godard in addition to numerous catalogues of modern and contemporary art. He is the proprietor of ‘caboose’, an independent scholarly publisher of books on film, and the author of Découpage (2014), a brief historical and theoretical study of this aesthetic concept in cinema and the only volume on the topic in any language.

87 ‘L’esthétique n’est pas la logique, mais il y a une logique de l’esthétique.’ Metz, ms. CM1507d, p. 25.