Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema: Film Semiology and Beyond.
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
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11. Cyber-Metz?

The Notion of Code in the Writings of Christian Metz

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

doi: 10.5117/9789089648921/ch11

Abstract
This chapter examines the historical connection between the structuralist paradigm and cybernetics in order to re-evaluate the epistemological foundation of the notion of ‘code’ as it appears in the work of Christian Metz. The study focuses on the evolution of the notion of code in Metz’s writings from ‘Cinéma: langue ou langage?’ (1964) to Langage et cinéma (1971). Delineating the genealogy from Metz’s semiological model to cybernetics (especially through information theory) subsequently allows us to investigate the potential contribution of the Metzian model to the contemporary study of video games and digital objects.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, epistemology, cinematic code, cybernetics, theory of video games

For the study of language in operation, linguistics has been strongly bulwarked by the impressive achievement of two conjoined disciplines – the mathematical theory of communication and information theory [...]. We have involuntarily discussed in terms specifically theirs, of encoders, decoders, redundancy, etc. What, precisely, is the relation between communication engineering and linguistics? Is there perhaps some conflict between these two approaches? Not at all!

(Roman Jakobson, 1952)

In this article, I will focus on the different uses of the concept of code at the heart of the ‘cinematic thought’ of Christian Metz. To do so, I will take as a starting point the premise that there exists a historical lineage between the notion of code as set out in information theory and its application by Christian Metz, mainly in his writings ranging from ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ to *Language and Cinema.*

I must specify that this hypothesis does not offer an in-depth review of the linkages Metz establishes between cinema and linguistics or cinema and semiotics. Instead, it aims to shed partial and complimentary light on it, by observing the somewhat metaphorical integration of information theory to the field of linguistics and semiotics, beginning in 1948. This is done in order to better assess its potential effect on the use of the concept of code in Christian Metz’s writing.

Indeed, by the late 1940s, mathematical information theory, designed to understand digital encoding and message transmission, namely within telecommunication networks, had seduced some linguists, including Roman Jakobson. Insight into this relationship will later lead me to examine the influence that Christian Metz’s work has had on the field of new digital media studies and, more specifically, the study of video games.

‘Code’: A Cross-Cutting Concept

It is clear that computer codes do not equate semiotic codes. At the same time, new media code and algorithmic structures do not fit the ‘structural’ paradigm, which requires that structures be constructed by an analyst and, after identification of distinguishing features, organized into a system.

However, as Peter Wuss notes in *Kunstwert des Films und Massencharakter des Mediums*, the near absence of the cybernetic model in film studies should not lead us to conclude that the model has had no effect on the evolution of film theory, chiefly through film semiotics. Indeed, cybernetics, in the field of hard sciences, offered a model that would allow for the formalization of communication systems, their regulation, and the circulation of information on a systematic and quantifiable basis. Wuss further notes, without specifying the history of how this took place, that

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key cybernetic concepts such as ‘information’, ‘systems’, or even ‘code’ have been transposed into the field of film semiotics.  

In fact, Metz includes cybernetics and information theory in his description of the structural paradigm of scientific theory, featured in the first part of ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’. He paints these theories in a fairly unflattering light, pointing out that they ‘[have] outdone even the most structuralist of linguistics’. In 1964, Metz therefore sees in cybernetics an extreme example of the formalization of communication, a model that does not fit at all with the methodology he seeks to design. Later, in the same piece, Metz describes the language of the ‘American logicians’ computers as being ‘more perfectly binary than the best analyses of Roman Jakobson’. 

The parallel that Metz draws between the binarism of computers and that of Jakobson’s analyses is telling. Indeed, while the notion of opposition is central to Jakobson’s work since the 1920s, he went on to become an ambassador for cybernetics for a decade, after discovering it in the late 1940s. It seems necessary at this point to make a detour into the early days of the structural enterprise in order to assess the ‘cybernetic’ affiliation of the concept of code as it evolved from its original field to that of linguistics and semiotics.

**Cybernetics Meets Linguistics**

It was in New York, at the end of the 1940s and throughout the 1950s, that cybernetics and structuralism intersected. We know how decisive the collaboration between Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss at the New York Free School for Advanced Studies was in broadening the structural approach beyond the confines of linguistics.
Jakobson first discovered cybernetics in 1948, while taking part in the 5th Macy Conference.8 He developed an interest in the cybernetic approach, which he applied prolifically in his work in the 1950s, all the while actively cooperating with engineers.9 The work of Jürgen Van de Walle shows that by the 1950s, Jakobson had begun adapting the precepts of phonology – a discipline he worked on at the Prague School – to the cybernetic and informational model. Jakobson’s comprehension of language at the time – as a teleological, functional, and binary system – was strongly and scientifically steeped in cybernetic theory. This came at a cost that Van de Walle describes as a way of psychologizing information theory.10

Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Charles Hockett, and Thomas Sebeok all took part in the activities of the New York Free School of Advanced Studies in the 1950s and 1960s. Hockett played an active role in spreading information theory within the field of linguistics by writing a review of Shannon and Weaver’s book for the prestigious publication *Language* in 1953.11 As for Sebeok, he was deeply influenced by information theory, which would remain a fundamental theoretical reference in his work throughout his career.12

The Free School was financed by the Rockefeller Foundation of New York, whose members included Warren Weaver, Director of the Department of Natural Sciences from 1932 to 1955. Warren Weaver also supervised Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon’s research during World War II.13 As Bernard Geoghegan points out, the Foundation would play a key role in the widespread use of cybernetics and information theory across many American institutions, including the Free School.14

It is in this context that Jakobson was swept up in the wave that was cybernetics in the late 1940s. Shortly after the publication of *Cybernetics*, he contacted Norbert Wiener to share his enthusiasm for the book: ‘At every step I was again and again surprised at the extreme parallelism between the problems of modern linguistic analysis and the fascinating problems

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10 Van de Walle, ‘Roman Jakobson, Cybernetics and Information Theory’, pp. 113-16.
14 Ibid., pp. 102-04.
you discuss. The linguistic pattern fits excellently well into the structures you analyse and it is becoming still clearer how great are the outlooks for a consistent cooperation between modern linguistics and the exact science.15 Lévi-Strauss also comments on Cybernetics, lauding it as a piece ‘whose importance from the point of view of the future of social sciences can hardly be overestimated’.16 That same year, Warren Weaver sent Jakobson a version of The Mathematical Theory of Communication (1949)17 as part of an international survey he was conducting on international linguistic methods sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation.18

Shannon was the first to publish a version of the document in 1948, which made up the core of statistical information theory.19 Warren Weaver discussed Shannon’s findings in the first part of the 1949 version and disseminated Shannon’s mathematical and statistical model, while considering the potential impacts this model could have on the fields of verbal and social communication.

The correspondence that Jakobson exchanged with Charles Fahs, Weaver, and Norbert Wiener are a testament to his interest in cybernetics and information theory, which he believed capable of uniting the study of communication with that of language. Jakobson is therefore credited by many researchers as acting as a ‘courier’ between the budding structuralism of the time and cybernetics.20 He even went on to become a fervent ambassador for cybernetics in the 1950s: he collaborated with Norbert Wiener at the MIT and promoted cybernetics to European intellectuals such as Lacan and Hjelmslev.21 After having been in contact with Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss also became very interested in studying the research emanating from the field of engineering as well as in the theoretical promises of cybernetics.22

20 See, namely, Segal, Le Zéro et le Un, pp. 405-12; Kay, Who Wrote the Book of Life?, pp. 300-02; Lafontaine, L’empire cybernétique, pp. 94-97.
21 Geoghegan, ‘From Information Theory to French Theory’, p. 112.
22 Lafontaine, L’empire cybernétique, pp. 90-92; Geoghegan, ‘From Information Theory to French Theory’, pp. 116-20. Geoghegan describes Lévi-Strauss’s enthusiasm for cybernetics in
Lévi-Strauss's many references in his writings to the works of Wiener, Von Neumann, and Shannon have recently become the topic of specific research. In 2006, in response to an article on how he had received cybernetics, Lévi-Strauss would note: ‘over time, I would draw more inspiration from information theory than from cybernetics’.

The convergence between structural linguistics and cybernetics brought to light in Jakobson’s work in the 1950s is replicated in the communication model he presented at the Conference on Style at the University of Indiana in 1958, later published in his article ‘Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics’ (Figure 11.1 and 11.2).

The first half of the 1950s as well as his attempt to create a research laboratory that would apply the precepts of cybernetics and developments in electrical engineering to the field of human sciences. The project did not take place due to lack of funding.


In Jakobson’s work, language communication processes are then modelled based on Shannon’s model of information transmission. For Shannon, the aim of the statistical model is to ensure an efficient transmission of the message, be it graphic or auditory, without any concern for sense or meaning. The transposing of the message as a discrete, coded signal occurs only at a material level.

According to Louis Quéré, the four main postulates that lay the foundation of the concept of code in information theory – that it precede the message, that it function as a communication marker, that it be independent of its ‘content’, and that its position be external to the source, ‘the emitter’ – are transposed into the field of structural linguistics.25

In Shannon’s model, there is the message on one side, seen as the mathematical representation of a sound, a letter, or audiovisual flow, and the signal on the other, a package of binary digits. For example, we move from a given message to a series of electrical impulses. In this way, the model aims to react to the technical limitations of electrical engineering, and offers formulae to calculate message redundancy, maximum channel capacity, or digital signal compression, all of which are still used in telecommunications and information technology to this day.

Geoghegan describes this transposition in the following terms:

Once imported into linguistics, the diagrammatic strategies of communication engineering imposed an orderly set of distributions and series upon the unruly multiplicity of language-performances; thus, language itself became part of an economically distributed series of technical tasks within an assembly line of communications. Jakobson redefined Saussure’s celebrated concepts of la langue (language-system) and la parole (speech or speech act) as ‘code’ and ‘message’. […] With Jakobson’s proposals in place, a new type of knowledge of the human sciences could be produced: one emboldened by the methods of mathematics, refined and restricted by technological instruments, and empowered by the lavish resources and aspirations accumulating around engineering in postwar America.26

As Geoghegan states, this transposition requires an alignment between language communication and the fundamental vectors of information

26 Geoghegan, ‘From Information Theory to French Theory’, p. 115. The Shannon and Jakobson models are featured in Geoghegan’s article.
theory: a *technicist* approach to communication that divides the operation into distinct modules in order to render message transmission more useful and efficient. By replacing the Saussurian language/speech dichotomy with the code/message dichotomy borrowed from information theory, Jakobson offers a model capable of handling ‘acts of speech’. This model will prove particularly useful to semioticians in the 1960s.

At the end of ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, Metz states that film semiotics should focus on ‘large signifying units’ by adopting a method most akin to ‘acts of speech’.27 He cites as examples Benveniste’s discourse analysis, Greimas’s transphrasic approach, as well as Jakobson’s poetic function. Metz then refers to Jakobson’s text, ‘Closing statement: linguistics and poetics’, which features the famous communication diagram.28

**Linguistic and Semiotic Codes**

Even though, following the decline of cybernetics, the cyber-structuralist endeavour in which Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson were involved in the 1950s was abandoned in the early 1960s, traces of it remained in semiotics, a field that was budding at the time. These traces begin with linguistics.

In *The Code Model of Communication*, Perry Blackburn demonstrates that the code model is a fundamental metatheoretical component of modern linguistic theory. According to him, this model developed gradually over the first half of the 20th century, by incorporating various communication sub-models and functions.29

Blackburn’s work retraces the integration of information theory into structural linguistics, as it is assimilated to Saussure’s ‘speech circuit’ to the point of being mistaken for it. According to Blackburn, this integration of the informational paradigm occurred through a misappropriation or *mis-reading* of said theory. Blackburn makes one important point: in Shannon’s model, code is an *algorithmic* entity that allows for the transition – or ‘translation’ – from message to discrete signal.30

30 Ibid., p. 67.
Blackburn notes that the terms derived from information theory spread throughout linguistic research from the 1950s onwards. They appear in the works of Charles Hockett in 1953 as well as the works of Jakobson, Eugene Nida, Noam Chomsky, and even Michael Halliday. The same comment can be applied to the semiotics of cinema. Indeed, information theory vocabulary is used by Pasolini, who discusses ‘codifiable’ and ‘decodable’ signs in Heretical Empiricism (‘The Code of Codes’), and by Metz, in the code/message pair. The relationship with information theory also occurs through Soviet semiotics, namely through the works of Jurij Lotman, who draws an even more direct link to cybernetics, as it appears in his Semiotics of Cinema in 1973. Furthermore, when Lotman considers the functions of communication he refers to Jakobson, specifying that the ‘classic model of communication was brought by Jakobson’. Here, cybernetics is presented in part through the lens of Jakobson’s work as well as through its direct link to Soviet semiotics.

Indeed, by the late 1950s, cybernetics would become a predominant model in the USSR, constituting the main theoretical basis for the Semiot-
ics School of Tartu and playing a part in the popularity of structuralism in the USSR. The first semiotics class given by Lotman in 1962 at the University of Tartu was part of the ‘major in cybernetics’. Norbert Wiener would also take part in the first International Federation for Automatic Control conference in Moscow in 1960.

**Code in the Work of Christian Metz**

In ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, the word ‘code’ is in part attached by Metz to the cybernetic model while also being used in a broader sense, harking back to Saussure’s *language system*. The *language system* is therefore perceived as a ‘highly organized code’.37 Saussure speaks thus of the ‘language’ in his *Course in General Linguistics*.38 With regards to Jakobson’s work and phonological systems, Metz also mentions this notion, whereby the code refers back to the position of the phonemes ‘in the phonemic grid of each language’.39 The concept also appears when describing the cinematic image as a ‘rich message with poor code’,40 implying the quantifiable nature of information in Shannon’s theory.

Metz evokes the code/message dichotomy once again when he discusses cybernetics. He ironically criticizes computer scientists who have used machines to ‘dissect language’. Cybernetics is therefore present in the work of Christian Metz in 1964, as an extreme example of communication and significance modelling, quite at odds with cinematic language, which is barely coded and eminently ‘flexible’. At the end of the text, Metz explicitly aligns natural languages with binary language, contrasting them with cinematic language.41

In Metz’s writings dating from 1964 to 1967, certain aspects of the cinematic language and the denotation/connotation dichotomy elude coding, due to the emphasis Metz places on phenomenology. The decisive role given to the analogy of the cinematic image constitutes a leitmotif in his early semiotic thinking. The focus on film ‘narrativity’ as a factor for the organization of ‘large signifying units’ is also a recurring feature in ‘The

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40 Ibid., p. 69.
41 Ibid., p. 90.

In ‘Some Points in the Semiotics of Cinema’ of 1966, Metz places narration and the diegetic elements (‘the characters, the landscapes, the events’, etc.) in the denotation camp. The reason why a semiotics of denotation is possible in film is precisely because the unfurling of the narrative brings forth a reasoned structure of signifiers. Metz explains that such a structure is ‘to a certain extent codified’, specifying that it is ‘codified, not necessarily encoded’. Here, the code concept within linguistics (‘the language code’) remains present in Metz’s mind as he unveils his argument with customary caution. In the same article, Metz mentions the paradigmatic and clearly associates cinematic framing to ‘acts of speech’, as opposed to the word within the language system, which, according to Metz, is ‘precast by code’.  

An important fracture starts to appear in 1967-1968 in Metz’s semiotic approach. The pluricodic turning point which then occurs takes place after the meeting between Metz and Umberto Eco in Pesaro. In 1968, Umberto Eco publishes La struttura assente [‘The Absent Structure’], in which information theory plays a substantial role. The mathematical theory of communication is debated and leads Eco to draw the contours of the ‘lower threshold’ below which semiotic research has no stronghold; an area where ‘meaning’ gives way to ‘signal’. If the issue of the transmission of information as ‘physical units’ is outside the scope of semiotics, the model and the terms derived from the mathematical theory of communication nevertheless guide the entire theoretical apparatus developed by Eco. Thus, the pattern of communication that he features uses terms such as ‘signal’, ‘channel’, ‘noise’, and ‘message’. ‘The semiotic information’ is thought of along the lines of ‘physical information’ of a given message, borrowed from Shannon’s model. Eco stresses that these two types of information ‘correspond to the same definitions’ and that ‘they represent a state of freedom with respect to determinations’. Hence, evolutions in semiotic

43 Metz, ‘Some Points in the Semiotics of Cinema’, p. 98.
44 Ibid., p. 99 (emphasis in original).
45 Ibid., p. 100. In this article, connotation is not discussed in terms of codicity.
46 See Martin Lefebvre’s article in this volume.
48 Eco, La structure absente, 118.
research among Italian authors in the late 1960s, which lean towards a greater consideration of the plurality of codes and plurality of ‘media’, profoundly influenced the work of Metz.

Thus, the comments put forward by Metz on earlier texts in the footnotes of Film Language show a considerable change in perspective. Expressiveness, which was once an earlier step prior to the process of signification, is now attached to forms of socio-cultural codifications, which are more or less rigid. The domain of the code thus extends itself to cover the full production of meaning in cinema. Indeed, cinematic language is only part of the overall global message that the film represents. Other levels of the message, whether perceptual, cultural, or narrative, also fall under the code’s register. In ‘Problems of Denotation in the Fictional Film’, the analogy becomes a threshold between ‘specialized codes’ and ‘cultural codes’. Metz says then, in his 1968 notes that accompany ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, that he considers ‘the realities codes possess [to be] more complex, more various, subtler [...]’.

Decoding Language and Cinema

Metz’s multi-codic paradigm reaches its peak in 1971 in Language and Cinema. Metz then clearly distinguishes, on the one hand, the codes that are considered ‘systematically homogeneous units’ and languages, which are ‘physically homogeneous units’. Strong association emerges between languages, which are discussed in the context of the ‘material of expression’, in Hjelmslev’s terms and codes, which are discussed in terms of their

49 Gianfranco Bettetini and Emilio Garroni’s books, published in 1968, are other examples of this pluricodic turning point. Gianfranco Bettetini, Cinema, lingua e scrittura (Milan: Bompiani, 1968); Emilio Garroni, Semiotica ed estetica (Bari: Laterza, 1968).
54 Metz, Language and Cinema, p. 35.
55 For a discussion of concepts such as ‘form’, ‘material’, and ‘substance’ as Metz uses them, see Metz, Language and Cinema, pp. 208-23.
transferability from one language to another, or, on the contrary, to their
dependence on a particular medium.

Let us now look at definitions of the code submitted by Metz in *Language
and Cinema*. At first, Metz defines code as a ‘domain within which the
transformations of the signifiers corresponds to variations in the signified’. This
broad definition should therefore correspond to all codes described in
the book: the ‘code of editing’, the code of ‘cinematic punctuation’, codes
of framing, lighting, or even ‘technological codes’.

Metz also provides an example of a technological code by way of the
code of mechanical reproduction of movement, which ensures the pas-
sage of photograms, discrete units, to the uninterrupted visual image
on the screen, which produces an impression of movement. Thus, the
units of this technological code are photograms. Here, the idea of the
code is similar to that formulated by information theory. The code of
mechanical reproduction of movement accounts for the shift from a
sequence of discrete units to a continuous flow, two levels that depend
on the materiality of the cinematic image (or its projected materiality).
Metz himself performs this comparison, associating technological codes
with computer programmes:

On the other hand, one also finds at least one group of codes in which
the photogram is certainly the minimal unit [...]: we are thinking of the
technological codes which are involved in the very functioning of the
cinematic equipment (of the camera), which are its program (in the sense
that one speaks of the program of a computer) and which constitute the
very principle of its construction and operation.

This proximity is justified by the mechanical aspect of cinema that is
discussed here by Metz. He can thus envisage it in technological terms.
In comparison, the units of the film editing code are ‘sequences’, abstract
units that must be identified and defined by the analyst. These units entail
a set of correlations between the arrangement of cinematic signifiers and
their implications in terms of meaning. This in turn links back to the

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56 For a complete and scholarly description of the conceptual framework developed by Metz
in *Language and Cinema*, see Philip Rosen’s article in this volume.
58 Ibid., p. 108, 129.
59 Ibid., p. 191.
60 Ibid.
Spatio-temporal organization of some elements of the diegesis. Comparing the technological code mentioned above to the film editing code, one sees how the flexible notion of code is used by Metz to account for a highly diverse set of realities.

The definition of the concept of code in *Language and Cinema* also crops up many times in comparison with natural languages that are themselves constructed according to a hierarchy of codes: phonological, morphological, syntactic, or by other codes due to their phonation. Moreover, when Metz justifies the distinction he makes between code and system, he comes back to the origins of the concept and evokes information theory:

> In its original context, i.e., information theory, it serves to name a system of similarities and differences which, by definition, is designed to serve repeatedly and to remain the same across numerous ‘messages’. In linguistics, into which the word was later imported, it refers to *langue* (but not *langage*, discourse, or utterance), which presents the same character of anonymous repeated applicability.

Metz then uses ordinary language to justify his use of the term, designed as an infinitely reusable system. Given the diversity of codes mentioned in *Language and Cinema* – also diversity of nature, as shown in the example of technological codes – one can imagine that the original meaning of the concept of code as a ‘system of similarities and differences’ comes into play in the design of Metz’s code. Indeed, all the codes and sub-codes in *Language and Cinema* are not codes on the same footing as Saussure’s *langue*; they do not all represent a ‘domain within which the transformations of the signifier correspond to variations in the signified’ but they all make up ‘systems of similarities and differences’: this is the meaning given by Metz to information theory code.

Beyond this terminological development carried out by Metz, the most common definition, in *Language and Cinema*, to qualify the code is that of a ‘unified field of commutations’, borrowed from Hjelmslev.

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61 Ibid., pp. 200-01 (emphasis in original); ‘Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film’, pp. 143-44.
64 Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 29. Metz notes: ‘a (reconstructed) “domain” within which the transformations of the signifier correspond to variations in the signified, and within which
Hjelmslev is not trivial. On the one hand, his model has the merit of analyzing the processes of signification regardless of the medium at hand, and on the other hand, it supplies a detailed analysis grid of the materiality of language. Thanks to this, his presentation could theoretically be transferred to other mediums besides the phonic or graphic matter of natural languages.

Another feature of glossematics, which was notably commented on by Thomas Pavel: the theoretical paradigm developed by Hjelmslev is exactly in line with the positivist tradition that emerged from the Vienna Circle and thus attempts to provide a formalization of language functioning, in accordance with the foundations of logical empiricism. In Hjelmslev’s opinion, theory must be deductive, and due to the constraints of coherence, exhaustiveness, and simplicity, it should be possible for it to provide a formal calculation procedure which, at a later stage, would be confronted with the concrete data of natural languages. Thus, just as Hjelmslev does, Metz considers codes as purely formal systems.

Hjelmslev’s work serves as a theoretical anchor to Metz’s developments and is in no way implemented in its entirety. Metz notes on numerous occasions that cinematic codes are more flexible, less rigid than their linguistic equivalents. All textual systems generate a shift in the codes that they activate – in a textual system codes overlap, complement, or cancel each other out – but nothing like this takes place in Hjelmslev’s model. Even if Metz’s understanding of glossematics is remote, metaphorical in a sense, the positivist and logical model remains present in the background and provides a guarantee of rigour in Metz’s semiotic approach.

Despite the fact that textual systems entail a shift in codes and generate codical interferences, Metz does not abandon the radical possibility of reconstructing, by induction and using films as a base, cinematic language as a set of codes and sub-codes that are specifically cinematic and classified by degree of specificity, based on their dependence on certain traits of the material of expression.

The empirical and logical touch of Metz’s semiotics recalls the systematic organization and orderly division of the processes of signification borrowed by Jakobson from information theory, when he set forth his communication model in 1960. This orderly character, quasi-algorithmic of meaning, is

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66 Metz, Language and Cinema; in particular see the chapter ‘The system of the film as displacement’, pp. 99-104.
reinforced and supported by the positivist and logical model of glossematics. Metz repeats the inaugural gesture of Shannon when he endeavours to completely detach his model of analysis from the content of the observed phenomena. Towards the end of the book, Metz will note that the codes discussed are only ‘codes of expression’ rather than ‘codes of content’.67

When he mentions the possibility of preparing an inventory of all the cinematic codes and sub-codes, Metz talks about this undertaking in a contradictory manner. On the one hand, he tells us, cinema is a language that is too rich, too important a cultural phenomenon to be reduced to an inventory of codes. But, on the other hand, film semiotics being a recent field, much younger than linguistics, one cannot exclude the possibility that one day semiotics of cinema will be able to reach a level of formalization comparable to that of linguistic models.68 This is where a tension arises that is present throughout Language and Cinema, oscillating between the wish for scientific modelling and applied detailed analysis that measures the necessary gaps, the perpetual differences, between the systematic model and films themselves.

In The Imaginary Signifier, the code cedes its prime place in Metz’s theoretical arena. Whereas, a few years ago, the effort to construct a pluricodic model aimed to contest the perception of cinematic language as a unique code, the psychoanalytic turning point in Metz’s work allows the code to stay in the singular. Metz speaks about the ‘cinematic code’69 to designate the precise arrangement specific to the cinematic experience that materializes as the institution of the ego and the institution of cinema intersect. The code becomes synonymous with the cinematic apparatus as a whole, the singular vectors of experience that make up ‘the filmic state’.70 Meanwhile, the term is also used to denote features that are unique to this scheme of experience, such as identification codes and sub-codes.

The concept of code therefore plays a variety of roles in the writings of Christian Metz, as I have tried to demonstrate in this brief overview. Language and Cinema is also the code’s moment of hegemony in the work of Christian Metz, where its information theory roots are the most apparent.

67 ‘Codes of content’ are defined by Metz as codes that can exist in all types of cultural production, codes free of all traits of the ‘material of expression’. Metz, Language and Cinema, pp. 245-51.
70 Ibid., p. 138.
Christian Metz and Game Studies

Between information theory and semiotics, a lexical contagion has arisen, carrying with it the shadow of a model targeted at thinking of communication as a logical and systematic process of encoding and decoding. This was in fact my hypothesis. One may wonder if this relationship, whether we consider it as being simply a terminological one or, on the contrary, a conceptual one, has led some video game theorists to tap into Metz’s model in order to reflect on videogame structures, or to think about the gaming experience.

Christian Metz was touched upon in the field of Game Studies at the inaugural debate between ‘narratologists’ and ‘ludologists’ that marked the early years of the discipline. As early as 2001, some researchers, such as Espen Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca, and Markku Eskelinen, advocated for the establishment of a field of research that would have its own analytical and conceptual tools, without regard to literary or cinematic studies. They believed that the study of video games should focus on the particularities of the video games’ structure as a media object. In their view, research should concentrate on the unique position of the player in the gaming environment and on video game mechanics and the objects’ other specific characteristics. Other researchers, called ‘narratologists’ in the early years of the field’s existence, started working with video games and tried to apply the tools, or at least the perspectives, that had come from literary theory.

In this divided environment, defenders of the specificity of gaming sometimes referred to Metz to reaffirm the impossibility of conducting a narratological-based study of video games. In ‘The Gaming Situation’, Markku Eskelinen attempts to lay the foundation for the study of video


games as opposed to the study of literary and cinematic works. Eskelinen quotes Metz to point out that video games do not possess the equivalent of the dual temporality of narrative: according to the famous statement of Christian Metz, ‘one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme’. Contrary to this, in games there is only one time scheme necessary: the movement from the beginning to the winning (or some other) outcome. In cases where another time scheme is invented, it is not as important as the first one.

Video games therefore would only require one level of temporality; that of the immediate interaction of the player with the video game’s environment. This point is also made by Jesper Juul in the same issue of *Game Studies*, where he states that no distinction is visible in the gaming experience which could be seen as equivalent to that between story time and plot time. Juul also speaks about the dual temporality, as expounded by Metz, to give weight to his argument. It is Metz as narratologist who is called upon here, in a negative manner in a sense, to distinguish the gaming temporality from the literary or cinematic equivalent.

As for the ‘narratologists’, they do not mention Metz, and usually limit themselves to a description of the convergence between game and narrative. Some of the specificities that the two forms have in common are linear progression, space dedicated to the game/narrative, and structures of the ‘quest’ or the ‘riddle’. Some recent work, such as that completed by Sébastien Genvo or Boris Solinski, lean more toward action semantics, as developed by Greimas, to discuss the relationship between narrative and video games.

Although much research involving video games has been oriented towards textual analysis, often immanentist, of videogame objects, references to semiotics are rare. According to Espen Aarseth, author of *Cybertext: Perspectives*

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73 Christian Metz, ‘Notes Toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative’ [1966], in *Film Language*, 16-28 (p. 18).
on Ergodic Literature, methods of analysis of structuralism were developed for linear objects, regarded as sequences or chains of clearly ordered signs.\textsuperscript{78} At the same time, digital objects have two levels of material arrangement. Aarseth calls them ‘interface’ and ‘database’.\textsuperscript{79} For Aarseth, who is supported by many theorists, video game analysts must create a new theoretical model to understand these objects, a model that is adapted to their dual materiality. Therefore, literary and semiotic approaches are rejected, on the whole.

\textbf{Play Studies: The ‘French Touch’}

In recent years, several French researchers have contested the immanentist approach of Game Studies and have been campaigning for what they call Play Studies, studies of video games that would focus on the player’s experience rather than video games as formal structures.

Mathieu Triclot, author of Philosophie des Jeux Vidéo (The Philosophy of Video Games), is one of the main advocates of this approach. According to Triclot, video games produce a unique form of experience, an ‘instrumented experience’,\textsuperscript{80} due to the rapport of the player to the computer. Triclot examines video games through the realm of the experience, the terms of subjectivity created by the medium. As he describes the characteristics of this experience, Triclot finds inspiration in Metz’s notion of ‘filmic state’, which helps him elaborate and describe the ‘gaming state’.

Triclot incorporates the distinctive elements of the ‘filmic state’, as Metz presented them in the first part of the Imaginary Signifier, to describe the characteristics of the relationship between the player and the visual discourse of video games. Hence, the author tries to describe what takes place during the game in terms of affect, rapport with the image, identification, and desire – but also the relationship to reality. I will not dwell on his cross-analysis, but I would like to note that this comparative approach, using Christian Metz’s work, is reminiscent of the starting point of film semiotics in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, where Metz defines his theoretical framework by comparing cinema to verbal language, thus differentiating semiotics from linguistics.

\textsuperscript{78} Aarseth, Cybertext, p. 26. According to Aarseth, semiotics would be unable to take cybertexts into account, since it assumes that text represents a linear sequence of signs (here he quotes Hjelmslev), whereas cybertexts are fundamentally non-linear.

\textsuperscript{79} Aarseth, Cybertext, pp. 103-05.

\textsuperscript{80} Mathieu Triclot, Philosophie des jeux vidéo (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), p. 17.
In a more recent article, dedicated to space and time in video games, Triclot stresses the need to understand videogame objects by various means to truly grasp their complexity. Video game spaces can refer to the space outlined by the circulation of video games as commodities, to the geography of production spaces, and also to the typical environments where video games have been played during the last 40 years (the mall, the living room, etc.). But Triclot says that video game spaces also concern spaces internal to video games, which can be comprehended through a *semiotics of video games*. This study would be mindful of the historical and social conditions that shape the evolution of video game genres. To illustrate his points, Triclot notably provides a brief overview of the evolution of the internal construction of videogame spaces, using classic arcade games of the first half of the 1970s as examples. The philosopher of technology then identifies strong regularities in the construction of these spaces, a set that combines basic forms and historically identifiable transformations, which lead him to predicate the existence of ‘laws specific to gaming space’.83 One would have liked Triclot to develop this intuition of a semiotics of video games employing the work of Christian Metz, as he did illustriously in his *Philosophie des Jeux Vidéo*. If a semiotic approach can today be part of all multidisciplinary research devoted to video games, as Triclot implies, then allow me to say this: the time has come for a semiotics of video games!

_Translated from French by Corinne Bou_

**About the author**

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82 Ibid., p. 224.
83 Ibid., p. 228.
About the translator

Corinne Bou is a translator and conference interpreter living and working in Geneva, Switzerland. She usually works for the United Nations organizations and the Government of Switzerland and specializes in legal translation and in medical, human rights, and liberal arts subjects.