12. Yes, the Image Lies Beyond Analogy

Understanding Metz with Cartier-Bresson

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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/CH12

Abstract

Metzian semiology dates from the analog era (or the silver screen age), but a text like ‘Au-delà de l’analogie, l’image’ (‘Beyond Analogy, the Image’), which furtively evokes the notion of ‘purely relational entities’ in the image, perhaps allows us to rethink the analog and its analysis on the basis of the notion of composition, in the sense of a signifying network of heterogeneous elements. By interrelating Metz’s text with two photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson, this chapter seeks a distance from the notion of realism, instead putting the accent on an organized symbolic construction, which is based on relational figurative entities.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, visual analogy, realism, image theory, photography

Amidst the clamouring of debate around analog and digital, I sometimes wonder if Christian Metz would have been an analog and analog-only man, or if his semiology can be extended to the digital image.¹ This somewhat vague but recurrent line of inquiry can be derived from sources here and there throughout Metz's work, in the idea of the mechanical, photographic, or cinematographic image that is distinct from painting; for example, in the profilmic's instantaneous, single shot recording. Would Christian Metz consider an image, isolated as a whole, to be the result of a single shot (this term in itself communicating the idea of the profilmic's instantaneous capture), or wouldn't he? In this vein, I also find myself contemplating the notion that digital allows us to re-examine certain frequently overlooked

¹ I thank Sara Thornton for her suggestions.
components of analog, such as the act of composing an image; constructing it in or out of studio by adjusting heterogeneous elements, as illustrated beautifully by the Schüfftan process and other rear-projection techniques. The analog image is composite, either by way of special effects, as in the cited example, or in the relating of objects that Francastel called ‘figurative’. Whether an image is constructed from bits of space adjusted through digital compositing or from the coordination of figurative objects in analog is not of differential importance: both concern the image’s composition.

Today I would like to test this proposition, building upon Metz’s article, ‘Au-delà de l’analogie, l’image’ (‘Beyond analogy, the image’) from Essais sur la signification au cinéma, II. Metz himself admitted that the aim of this dense article is undoubtedly ‘manifold and somewhat convoluted’. It is not really possible to address this article in isolation, for it is positioned precisely, and by design, between ‘Images et pédagogie’ (Images and pedagogy) and ‘La connotation de nouveau’ (Connotation, Reconsidered), with this group preceding ‘Trucage et cinéma’ (‘Trucage’ and the Film), in which we find the first draft of Le signifiant imaginaire (The Imaginary Signifier). Further, I would like to test this idea as though the image (as an entity) could be reduced to one single, precise, isolated but authenticated image, in the style of the photogram.

‘Au-delà de l’analogie, l’image’ is partially the development of an endnote to ‘Images et pédagogie’, which is found a few pages previously (p. 149) and is dedicated to the application of semiotics to images, as well as to the didactic concern of this endeavour. In broad terms, the aim of ‘Au-delà de l’analogie, l’image’ is to express that it is uninteresting to reduce the notion of image to that of likeness, which ultimately leaves nothing to analyze apart from the degree of resemblance (we know that Metz will return to this point in a way in The Imaginary Signifier, addressing Münsterberg’s reflections on the absence of materiality in the cinematographic signifier – to which he adds the absence of recorded noise, in contrast to theatre). Further, Metz
underscores the imagination’s effectiveness in this absence of physical substance, the paradox of an immaterial medium – the interplay of light and shadow – and the spectator’s strong sensation of reality. This grounds the argument that semiotics must treat both what comes before analogy (what constitutes it or what it is founded upon) and beyond analogy (what supplements it; it is clear that here he reinitiates reflection around denotation and connotation), with respect to all of the diverse systems that come to inform the image. Here Metz references, without much elaboration, Panofsky’s iconography, the image’s multiplicity of codes (Eco), and its ‘socio-cultural stratifications’ (Francastel, Barthes, and Bourdieu).8

Earlier in the text, Metz took care to specify that the divisions applied by semiotics do not necessarily coincide with ‘units of socially conscious intention’ (= genre) or with ‘technical sensorial units’ (= material of expression, media and other channels):9 “The units that semiotics seeks to draw out and toward which it leads [...] are structural configurations, “forms” in the Hjelmslevian definition of the term (forms of content or forms of expression), of systems. These entities are purely relational, commutability fields within which diverse units take meaning in relation to one another.”10 It is clear that Metz seeks to detach his reflection from both technical objects and language (he does not refer to the image on film), and from a certain positivism (his commentary extends beyond what is present within the image) to highlight, as he repeatedly does, the necessity for theoretical analysis (structures and codes are not given: they are to be constructed) and the abstract character of structural relationships, in which the possibility of commutation is primordial.

What interests me here, and what I see as a deviation from Bazin and the open window onto the world, is this conception of the image as a system of relations or a field of commutability, a set for which the notion of support might be necessary but is not sufficient. In other words, if the technical sensorial unit is a continuum (a photograph, a shot, the field within a frame), the image is a network, a system of relations from which units acquire meaning by participating, by finding their place, and which only analysis can make sense of by breaking down this configuration to draw out its logic and productivity. Metz says ‘form of content or form of expression’ (emphasis added), because he is concerned with specifying the levels at play. But it seems to me, borrowing the example of Panofsky’s

9 Ibid., p. 158.
10 Ibid., p.159 (emphasis in original).
iconography, that it should be form of expression and form of content; it is the nature of iconography, outside the scope of visual analogy, to connect visual attributes to meaning other than that of represented objects. The lily accompanying the young woman in Christian iconography is certainly a lily, but it is also, when linked to a young woman, a symbol of her purity and virginity. With this woman-lily relationship, we are not far from Eisenstein’s reflection on the way in which meaning comes to images. This was also the meaning that Francastel gave to his notion of the figurative object (as evoked not for its resemblance but for its socio-cultural value). In this article, Metz references Jean Louis Schefer’s association of image and language, his affirmation that there is no image if it has not been described, and as such invested with writing. Whether it is invested with Scheferian writing or with semiotics, the result is the same: the image is only an image when analysis has brought systems up to date and revealed the interwoven units that give it meaning. For me, Metz here (and perhaps even better here than if he had gone on to do this in the article on connotation in which he contents himself with underscoring the ‘ways to film’) brings to the fore the notion of composition; that is, the relating of figurative objects within a frame. A doubt remains: it is not certain in Metz’s text that the image can be reduced to ‘an image’; the image at hand is rather the relationship between filmic images as in the Grand Syntagmatique (the origin of this notion of fields of commutability). I, for one, would make the gamble that Metz’s argument also applies to an image, to the representational elements contained within a single frame.

Composition is not only the aesthetic balance of masses and colours: it creates, structures, and elaborates meaning in the relationships that it establishes within the visual field. Units take meaning in relation to one another (and not in relation to the truth, reality, or even ideology). As such, we can conceive of an analog image (photographic or cinematographic) as an editing field within a frame, the establishment of meaning-bearing relationships among heterogeneous parts. The difference between analog and digital is then barely existent, when we speak, for example, of ‘compositing’. Even in the era of analog, the image owed something to Frankenstein.

From this point of view, ‘Au-delà de l’analogie, l’image’ brings Metz rather naturally to “‘Trucage” and Cinema’ which appears two articles later, and to a line of inquiry to which he will rarely return (apart from in parts of

11 Ibid., p. 161.
L’énonciation impersonnelle [Impersonal Enunciation]):¹³ that of the spectator’s consumption and appreciation of the fiction and the enunciation, the two at once and the two in equal measure. Here, not only does analogy stand dislodged, so does the strongly held fundamental belief that in order for the cinematographic spectacle to succeed, the act of enunciation must be completely forgotten. No, to love an image is to love what it represents as well as its creator (this could be a person, an institution, or a person transformed into an institution). It is to love the warmth of fiction, along with the decisive calculation of he or she who puts it on display and defines it by their choices.

To better grasp this question of form, of relational network, I would like to examine not cinema but photography, with two Henri Cartier-Bresson photos that appear a few pages apart in section 8 (no other title) of his last volume, Paysages (Landscape).¹⁴ I will begin with a few words about the second (second in the book and also second in my presentation) whose only caption reads ‘Brienza Italy 1973’ (Figure 12.2). This photograph is very well known for the considerable amiability of the cat passing through it, testifying to the shot’s instantaneity, its on-the-fly capture in what the Surrealists might call an instance of objective chance. Brienza is in Basilicata, in the south of Italy; we might say on the boot’s sole. I would like to enlighten our understanding of this image with a first photo (Figure 12.1), caption ‘Rome 1959’, because the two photos make a system in that they inform one another and in that the second clearly appears to be a variation, a refinement of the first.

With the first image, we better understand the absence of the part of the caption that would explain the analogy at hand (‘young girl playing in the courtyard’ or ‘young girl in a sunbeam’). We understand that this is precisely what Cartier-Bresson aims to avoid in indicating only the place and year, or the conditions of the shot, which say nothing about the photograph itself.

Photo 1 is in vertical format with a rather simple system of oppositions: expansive (the buildings) / reduced (the young girl), high / low, shadow / light, the immobility of the building / the mobility of the running young girl. The photo also plays on framing,¹⁵ not only with the young girl in the slice of light but also with the doors and windows. However, these open into darkness,

¹⁵ Framing indicates the presence, within the image’s frame, of other frames that cut up or divide parts of the visual field.
while the frame in which the girl appears opens into light. Laundry hangs from windows that open into black, while in the puddle of light the young girl emerges and stands out. Here we have, as seen often with Cartier-Bresson, a *mise en abyme* of the photographic act, the very act of snapping the photo: part framing, part triggering, and of course, part the effect of the conjunction of the two, in a double mastery of space (framing) and time (the fraction of a second, the vivid instant). This photo was possible neither a fraction of a second earlier nor a fraction of a second later than it was taken.

Cartier-Bresson’s art is evident in this immensely powerful framing, the shadow precisely bevelled from the front and the right, and in the camera click’s precision, immortalizing the young girl in her square of light. But the
power of this photo is also in what adds to the opposition between the sombre magnitude of the houses and the luminous fragility of the young girl: the repeated opposition between dark and bright, the cold (evidenced by the girl's jacket) and the sunny, the inorganic and the living, the dominant (the buildings, the shadow's diagonal) and the emergent (the young girl), the solitary and the frolicking, the melancholic and the merry. It is clear that Cartier-Bresson could only have made this work after choosing the high contrast black and white that allows him to deal in strong binary oppositions. The material of expression, in addition to the form that it is given, determines the form of the content in this photo's engaging scene, in which our conception of childhood (as playful, irrepressible, etc.) certainly plays a role. What part did production play in this photo? Cartier-Bresson could have asked the young girl to run through the sunny rectangle. I do not know that he did, but luckily Cartier-Bresson is not Doisneau. It also seems that this photo gains power from yet another source: the uniform flatness of the buildings (no balconies, no porches), reinforced by their frontal or lateral positioning, the slightly downward-facing viewpoint, and the small courtyard closed on three sides. These transform this fragment of cityscape into a theatre stage, even if we must add, 'in the Italian style'. In this way this unassuming running child bathed in a ray of light, buoyant with her outstretched arms and free-flying feet, recalls, in resemblance and in difference, the image of a ballerina on stage and in the spotlight. Or, if we consider the courtyard as a volume of space as opposed to a hollow, that of a bird escaping from its cage. The scene revives a childlike imagination, which we gladly lend it, so as to relieve the gloom of the surrounding houses. This photo is the moment of a double miracle: the miracle of hidden composition and the transformation of a small courtyard into a ballet stage.

The second photograph is slightly more complex and promptly dismisses the suspicion that I have just, no doubt falsely, formulated: it is impossible to ask a cat, particularly an Italian one, to please place his head precisely in a ray of light and to keep his front left paw elevated. This photo is thus one of those incredible Cartier-Bresson snapshots (he cleverly reduced this art to the 'decisive moment', explaining nothing), but here again with a remarkable architectural composition. This time the format is horizontal and the interplay of shadow and light composes three true units: the cat nearly in the centre; a group of men and women to the left in the foreground; and a woman's profile above and to the right in the background, at the very back. By a kind of miracle confirmed by the impression of instantaneity (I will return to this), all of the living beings are in light, while the shadow empties the small square of all life. There is again in this photograph something of the theatrical, in the full meaning of the word: a stage (the small square) on which groups are
arranged (the cat, the gossipers, and the solitary woman), where three separate ‘spotlights’ isolate and distinguish these groups from one another. There is also the monumental element that we identified in the preceding photograph: the stoniness of the setting, which sets the theatrical stage and impacts both the composition (the ratio of the masses of houses and people, the black sheet of shadow stretched between pockets of light) and the dramaturgy (the inorganic against the living, the cold against the hot, darkness creeping towards life).

There is, of course, a little sociology at play: in the group on the left, the men do not mix with the women (and vice versa) because their subjects of conversation cannot be the same and because the women seem to be working, while the men do not share this burden. There is also the opposition of the group on the left and the women in the back, those who participate in a community and she who refuses it (from this point of view, the women in the back echoes the cat in front). Like this unornamented village, the photograph is very simple: it does what it can with black and white, with shadow and light.

Is that all? I don’t believe so. The power of this photograph also seems to derive from a pleasurably discrete element that I will call the shadow’s anchor point, where the upper incline settles precisely at the central cube’s front point, in order to oppose and establish a relationship between the two.

16 As in the preceding photo, there is no evidence of plant or vegetal life in these spaces: only the stone that we might call ‘stripped’.
human groups on the left (the gossips) and the one on the right (the exiled woman above and to the right). This photograph was not produced (in that its structural configurations were not deliberately established, to borrow Metz’s definition) by Cartier-Bresson. He did not arrange these people, who ignore him completely. The sun took care of this, as these southern Italians, not very young and not very rich, are here in winter (Cartier-Bresson very much likes the winter sun and the way its beautiful white light contrasts with the season’s outsized shadows) evidenced by their mantels and shawls, ‘taking the sun’ (we can imagine that in summer this picture would be reversed, as people flee the sun). With the exception of the cat, it is this natural condition that arranges the subjects’ positioning within the field, or rather on the stage, of this small square entirely devoid of any accessory, any plant, any object, further reinforcing the grouping of the humans and the cat’s passage. Erving Goffman might call this, ‘a presentation of self in everyday life’,17 with what it communicates about nature (the sun) and culture (a village in the south of Italy). It must also be said that, as in the preceding photograph, the emptiness of the framed space and the stark paucity of urban stone, accentuated by the shadow’s hold over it, contributes to the bursting forth of the living beings, who stand dispersed in space while the frame keeps them all together (the other structural configuration). The network is here established on a backdrop of space (the small square), which at once unites and separates, disperses and incorporates, pulls apart and brings together: or, to use Metz’s terms, it is of course a technical sensorial unit base that establishes the configuration, which surpasses the simple analogy and the (vain) comparison of terms.

But we must admit that while the signifying units of this photograph were not produced by Cartier-Bresson (in the sense that the scene was not created per the photographer’s instructions), they were lengthily observed by the photographer, who certainly identified the place, watched the villagers’ practices, saw the shadow’s possibility and patiently awaited two things: that the shadow would settle at the corner of the central cube, and that the cat felt like passing through the square of sunlight (to maximize the image’s character and power, this small foregrounded square could not remain empty). A snapshot, certainly, but one long meditated, attempted (as in the preceding photo), reworked, and anticipated in order for frame and composition to come together to create these particular systems. If this photograph goes beyond analogy, it is due to the patience and the artistry of the photographer, who saw beyond the snapshot.

We must also take into account the timelessness that the arrangement, clothing, and habit (to take sun in winter) add to the photograph’s immobility: we could be in 1930 just as easily as in 1973 (the photograph’s date), in Spain as easily as in Italy. In this way, the fraction of a second that the cat makes evident ironically underscores the scene’s timelessness, a timelessness established only by the practices of the particular season (to warm up outside in the sun).

In this way, the photograph requires us to examine the structural configurations that, beyond analogy, make meaning by making the image. Through the photographer’s style (Metz would have called it ‘his manner of photographing’), we are made aware that this is not an ordinary photo, that it requires an expertise, a particular talent, a capacity not granted to everyone that makes art from black and white or beauty from the manifest poverty of southern Italians, shown as aging and isolated but with lifelong knowledge of how to preserve pockets of pleasure and conviviality. Cartier-Bresson’s talent is in his capacity to offer a continuum (a black-and-white photograph, with its oppositions and gradations) in which the paucity of elements commands the viewer’s gaze from front to back, top to bottom, and laterally, in order to relate the image’s components and construct the scene. But we also understand that Cartier-Bresson is drawn to Southern Italy, Franco’s Spain, or Greece for their hardscapes and light, elements that create strong distinctions between the living and the black. The draw is also in the facet of destitution that creates a stark contrast between the men and women in black and the swaths of sunlight: here, the material of expression (the two-dimensional, black-and-white photograph) corresponds with the form of the content (a hard and simple life in the South). We can clearly see how this could become a topos for the photographer: this opposition between the inorganic and the human, life’s span and its strength, crystallized in the recurrence of children playing in ruins or in harsh environments. It must be added, though, that this topos only emerges when the snapshot is superimposed with humanist reflection, the artistic choice of black and white, and the even more refined choice of visual planes rid of any unserving accessory, so that the oppositional and sense-making relationships between assembled elements can operate, imposing at once the composition’s meaning and its expertise, its emotion, and its art.

By this line of argument, I intended to convince myself that the short passage cited from ‘Au-delà de l’analogie, l’image’, in which Metz defines – in positive terms – what an image is for semiotics, had operational
strength even for an isolated image. I also sought to prove the existence of a syntagmatic for the image (understood as the equivalent of a photogram, a shot, or here a photograph), because within the frame, relational entities are both identifiable and connectable, capable of isolation because they are commutable. It also seems that the Metzian proposition, in his taking up Hjelmslev, allows expression’s material and its form (here the black-and-white photograph) to be considered together, in their dialectic. The same applies to the content’s material and its form (all that encompasses the signifying network and the photographer’s art, since Cartier-Bresson’s art is founded at least in part on a reflection on the photographic act), the use of black and white, and the selection of motifs (such as ‘the child of the ruins’) in which the three powerfully converge. The snapshot as such is no longer to be considered a reflex, spontaneously captured, but on the contrary a slow maturation, choices deliberated with regard to a medium (the black-and-white photo) and a theme (man and his environment). It is the reworking of one photo in another, the hunt for places and times, the wait for the famous ‘decisive moment’, which is in fact nothing but patience, so that – once the necessary conditions are fulfilled – the composition produces itself, and the elements (the cat in the sunbeam) work together in harmony.

In this way, digital or not, the Metzian notion of an image composed of ‘purely relational entities’ demonstrates its effectiveness at the heart of the isolated image, the still image or the shot, and not simply as a general attribute of the image as a concept. Here, the image is not valued for its realism, its analogical quality, but for its symbolic dimension (its capacity to signify and to move people), wherein any represented element forms a relational entity by virtue, especially, of its socio-cultural values (the figurative object) and of its valuation in respect to the other elements contained within the frame. Contrary to the consensus (‘to take a photograph’), Metz points in many directions with ‘Au-delà de l’analogie, l’image’. The first is that any strong image, made to move people or to impress them, is composed and constituted of elements that both belong to networks of meaning and that constitute among them a network of meaning. Analysis must then restrain itself from jumping directly to the content, to a representation of what was in front of the camera during a given moment, but instead to the reconstruction of these differentiating systems that always place the image within a symbolic register. The second is that all viewers rejoice simultaneously in both the story and its telling, in the content and in its form, in the snapshot and in its feat of strength. The example of Cartier-Bresson also affirms that, within a work, analysis must take into account the dialogue
between images, the reworking of one image presented in another, in search of, as with Hitchcock, a formula that intimately associates the material of expression with the form of the content and with metalinguistic mastery. With Cartier-Bresson – or, more precisely, for the two examples chosen – the snapshot is the fruit of a technical-aesthetic choice (the black-and-white photograph), the election of a theme (the child of the city or of the ruins), the patient hunt on foot (in order to identify places and their potential), the reduction of the focus to its core (the absence of parasitic accessories), the wait for the best possible composition, and the click of the shutter with near millisecond precision. Only at this price do the ‘relational entities’ emerge that give his photographs their extraordinary power. These are the living evidence of his art and the absolute focus of the analyst’s critical eye.

*Translated from French by Elisabeth Cramer*

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