19. **Metz with Deleuze**

From Film-Philosophy to Film Theory and Back Again

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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/CH19

**Abstract**

When Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* were published in the 1980s, they were frequently met with confusion within Anglo-American film theory because they explicitly rejected the methodological terrain that had come to dominate the field, a terrain that was derived from the path charted by Christian Metz. Since then, the tide has turned; increasingly, it appears that both psychoanalysis and structuralist approaches are out of favour, whereas Deleuze’s influence is hard to escape. By examining Metz’s conception of ‘film theory’ and Deleuze’s philosophical project in relation to how film theory and film-philosophy have been understood within film studies, this essay suggests ways in which thinking about ‘Metz with Deleuze’ may be generative for the future of film studies.

**Keywords**: film semiotics/film semiology, film theory, film-philosophy, phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory of cinema, methodology

The title of this essay, ‘Metz with Deleuze’, may appear to promise something that I have no plans to deliver on. This is not a Lacanian ‘avec’, which reveals some silent affinity in which one speaks the truth of the other, nor do I plan, in the spirit of Deleuze, to produce a hybrid monster out of this encounter. Rather, the idea of bringing together Christian Metz and Gilles Deleuze comes from the desire to think about the current moment in film studies, especially in the Anglo-American context that I know best. My gesture is to posit a linkage where there appears to be a gap. What is the gap? It is, first of all, one between a certain conception of theory and a certain conception of philosophy, one with a history in film studies that extends beyond the two thinkers in question. It is also a question involving the goals
and objects of writing, thinking about, and studying film. And finally, it is a question of politics: I want to use Metz and Deleuze to think about the relation between politics and film theory, or film-philosophy, in order to suggest that thinking about these authors together might be generative for thinking about the politics of cinema in film studies today.

I.

My story begins with the Spring/Summer 1973 issue of the influential British journal *Screen*: a special double issue devoted to ‘Cinema Semiotics and the Work of Christian Metz’. The opening editorial, by Paul Willemen, announced the issue as a preemptive strike. A threat loomed, namely the imminent publication of the English translation of Jean Mitry’s *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* [*The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*], and Willemen wished to thwart the ‘dismal prospect’ that Mitry’s work would be mistaken for ‘a massive breakthrough’. ‘The present issue of *Screen*’, he wrote, ‘is [...] an attempt to help counter such a development’.

Willemen acknowledged that ‘Mitry’s mammoth work [...] represents a summing up, the concluding stage [...] of a particular history of thought about the cinema. Mitry’s film-philosophy put a full stop after the pre-history of film theory.’ However, it is Metz who ‘establishes a break in the history of ideas relating to the object film’. Metz, he explained, did this by isolating the object of theory and asking ‘the question of pertinence’ with regard to cinematic discourse. Before him, theories of film were always an excuse to talk about something else. But with Metz and his idea of film as text or unit of discourse, the road toward a genuine film theory – a science in Louis Althusser’s sense – could be laid out for the first time. Nonetheless, Willemen, echoing Metz, made it clear that the theory of film, or the science of cinesemiotics, did not yet exist. Metz had merely paved the way and set the groundwork for a film theory to come.

Reading this editorial forty years later, it is hard not to be struck by a certain irony. On the one hand, whether or not it was the intervention of this particular issue of *Screen* that made the difference, it seems almost absurd today to imagine that the discovery of Metz’s work by the journal’s readers

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2 Ibid., p. 2. Metz’s reviews of Mitry’s two volumes were translated for this issue of *Screen*. To a large degree, Willemen was repeating Metz’s own claims about Mitry.
3 Ibid., p. 3.
was under serious threat from a massive wave of devoted followers of Mitry. Mitry’s work registered as barely a blip on the radar of English-language film studies – though, in fairness, the translation did not come out until much later – whereas Metz’s major early essays became the central reference for film theory, which quickly established itself as the cutting edge of cinema studies.

Nonetheless, it is hard to escape the uneasy feeling that the goal of Metz’s work – the establishment not only of a new, more systematic, more rigorous mode of film theory but also of a collective project worthy of being called a science and capable of progressing toward greater knowledge of its object – has been largely abandoned. Indeed, since Metz and Willemen themselves admitted that such a science remained on the horizon, perhaps we need to acknowledge that this era of film theory never came into existence in the first place. In the debates over what happened to film theory, we might ask another question: was there ever such a thing?

This question becomes more provocative when we consider that the name that Willemen gives to the pre-history of film theory – ‘film-philosophy’ – is the very term that has been taken up in recent years in English-language film writing in opposition to the more piecemeal or middle-range theories of analytic philosophers and cognitivist theorists, as well as in opposition to ‘Film Theory’ à la Metz – or, rather, to the larger agenda or agendas of film theory in the 1970s, a period in film theory often reductively called Grand Theory. Film-philosophy is suddenly presented as an emergent field, albeit with a long history – a still uncharted heterogeneous realm of speculative thought about films and cinema. Indeed, today’s discourse of film-philosophy – even as it encompasses a range of often divergent, if not mutually exclusive, philosophical perspectives – often explicitly makes the gesture of returning to questions that were central to pre-Metzian, or what is sometimes known as classical, film theory. This occurs through a renewed interest in the psychology of perception, in film as art, and in the phenomenological, ontological, metaphysical, or ethical questions found in a range of thinkers whose writings pre-date Metz’s earliest essays.

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4 For ‘piecemeal and middle range’ theories influenced by cognitivism and/or analytic philosophy, see, for example, the contributors to Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies, ed. by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) and Film Theory and Philosophy, ed. by Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For a wider range of recent philosophies of film, including more ambitious work in the field, see the journal Film-Philosophy, which began in 2005. See also recent books by D.N. Rodowick, Robert Sinnerbrink, and John Mullarkey.

5 See October, 148 (2014); the issue titled ‘A Return to Classical Film Theory?’ features a roundtable discussion on, and numerous examples of, the return to classical film theory in
Is this a regression? Or, rather, can the project of ‘film theory’ that Metz and Willemen advocated be considered a long detour, which can now be historicized and put behind us? The rise and fall of ‘capital T’ Theory (not only in film studies but also in the humanities more generally in the United States and elsewhere) has by now become a familiar narrative, and there is no need to rehash it in detail for the purposes of this essay. Rather, what I wish to do is to question whether there ever was such a Theory by looking more closely at Metz’s idea of theory as well as at its relationship to, and placement within, broader conceptions of theory at the time.

The 1973 issue of *Screen* – predating by a year the publications of the English translations of both *Film Language*, which included Metz’s major essays from the 1960s, and *Language and Cinema* – introduced Metz’s work to an English-speaking audience at the same time as it sought to inaugurate a new research trajectory toward the goal of an integrated theory of film. But Willemen’s editorial and the choice of essays within the journal already make it clear that this goal, of a theory to come on the terms established by Metz, was challenged from within by one of the theoretical discourses associated with structural linguistics – namely Marxism. For example, the journal included a translation of an unsigned essay that had appeared in *Cinéthique* in 1972 concerning Metz’s *Language and Cinema* (to which an exchange with Metz was appended) that concluded: ‘In the final analysis, the revolutionary ideological results which we have been able to draw from Metz’s researches are of no concern or interest to him.’

The various currents of 1970s film theory – and we might use *Screen* as the emblem for this moment, a role it often plays – all attempt in different ways to link three questions or problems: the relation of film to the social and historical world, the internal organization or structure of the film text or the filmic discourses, and the viewing experience of the spectator. The currents approach these questions using the following methodologies: historical materialism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis respectively. Of these methodologies, Metz was surely a – if not the – central figure of the latter two methodologies. He also made it clear that historical materialism was necessarily part of any larger theoretical project. But by preserving the semi-autonomy of the three perspectives, Metz’s conception of theory could be separated from the discourses influenced by his work that sought to knot them together.

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7 ‘Cinéthique on Langage et Cinéma’, *Screen*, 14, 1/2 (1973), 189 (p. 189).
I’ll briefly highlight several relevant aspects of film theory consistently emphasized by Metz from his early semiotic essays up through *Language and Cinema* and *The Imaginary Signifier*. Firstly, theory required the specification of its object. This meant a shift away from claims about cinema that were constructed at a broad level of generality; instead, he recognized that cinema is, as he put it, a ‘multi-dimensional phenomenon’ that does not ‘lend itself to any rigorous and unified study’.8 For rigour, precision, and the possibility of theoretical progress, one needed a knowable object and a definite methodological perspective.

Secondly, Metz conceived of theory as strictly descriptive and made a firm distinction between a systematic and rigorous semiotics of cinema and any more prescriptive or normative theories that, however brilliant they may have been, lacked that very rigour that film theory now required. Indeed, it was more than just rigour but what Metz called a ‘posture’. Discourses that used theory to rationalize taste or evaluative judgments, or moral or political positions of the writer, may, according to Metz, ‘contain insights of considerable theoretical importance, but the writer’s posture is not theoretical: the statement is sometimes scientific, the enunciation never’.9

Thirdly, for Metz, film theory was not to be conceived as the top-down application of terms from another discipline to that of film. Yet this is what he has been accused of, by Deleuze in particular: applying concepts from linguistics and psychoanalysis to cinema. While it is true that Metz was, in a sense, applying concepts from what he took to be the two major theories of signification – if not the only ones – what I wish to stress is that Metz never thought of theory as consisting of ready-made concepts for application, nor did he practice it along those lines. Rather, the borrowing of terms from other discourses such as linguistics, and later psychoanalysis, was treated as part of the preliminary process of an investigation, one that involved testing in order to measure the discourse’s applicability and its limits, and then modifying the terms of the inquiry accordingly. In other words, semiotics must pass through the application of linguistic methods in order to get beyond those very methods. The mutual specification of approach and of object required by Metz led at each turn to a narrowing of short-term expectations, coupled with a plea for preserving the goal of larger expectations in the long term.10

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10 Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 73: ‘It is because the analysis searches for a system that it must select from among the elements of the filmic text, retaining some as relevant and
This last point is worth stressing. The excitement that Metz’s work generated in *Screen* and elsewhere may have had as much to do with the shaping of a problematic that opened up the paths for future research as it did with the results that it obtained. However polemical Willemen may have been in his editorial preface, to reread the 1973 issue of *Screen* is to be confronted not with the dogmatism of Grand Theory but with the emergence of a problem field and terms for debate, as well as a sense of anticipation and of work to be done.

Nonetheless, the issue of *Screen* reflects the way in which much of the discourse of 1970s film theory differed from Metz’s conception: at the time, theoretical inquiry was often avowedly prescriptive and emphatically political. How did Metz’s conception of film theory relate to historical materialism or ideological criticism? For him, this was a complex problem that, at least for the time being, needed to be deferred. Semiotics, he argued, could not be absolutely isolated from the larger context, which included an investigation of the ‘cinematic fact’ (involving the technological, sociological, and economic context of cinema). At the same time, many of the elements that make up the cinematic fact must be bracketed in any serious examination of the ‘filmic fact’ as signifying event.

When Metz, in his 1975 essay ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, asked ‘What contribution can Freudian psychoanalysis make to the study of the cinematic signifier?’,12 he did so with the suggestion that psychoanalysis was a necessary continuation of linguistics-inspired analysis within a broader semiotics. At the same time, he insisted that both must be ‘set within the horizon of a *third perspective,* which is as it were their common and permanent background: the direct study of societies, historical criticism, the examination of infrastructures’. However, in his view, the ‘junction is much less easy’ here because it demanded a rigorous analysis of political economy, which has its own laws that would bring the semiologist far afield.13

Metz often suggested that the distinct, but nonetheless related, semiotic projects consisting on the one hand of the analysis of codes and textual systems, and on the other the metapsychology of the spectator, were both relevant to ideological criticism. As he put it 1978, ‘From the beginning

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*temporarily* [emphasis mine] ignoring others. For the text (the same text) also contains other traits, which will be pertinent to the study of diverse non-unique systems (i.e., codes) which are at work in the film.’

11 Ibid., p. 18.
13 Ibid., p. 18.
on, semiotics was an endeavour to de-mystify dominant cinema.” But his conception of theory continually thwarted the attempt to draw a straight line between this demystification and any larger political consequences.

In *Language and Cinema*, he summarized his project at that stage as the analysis of ‘film texts in order to discover either textual systems, cinematic codes, or sub-codes’. Adding that while ‘extra-cinematic codes’ play an important role, their analysis must be excluded from this task because ‘[t]he extra-cinematic material found in films is as [...] varied as social life itself’. There is no science that will cover all aspects of films ‘because films may be about anything’. And, ‘[t]he immoderation of the expectation only encourages cinematic *journalism*’.

‘The Imaginary Signifier’ notably revised the conditions of the inquiry in Lacanian terms. Psychoanalytic reflection on cinema was defined ‘as an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic’. Film texts, then, were associated with the imaginary and codes with the symbolic. Meanwhile, for a number of writers influenced by Metz, Althusser’s use of Lacan’s concept of the imaginary in his famous definition of ideology gave a more explicit political valence to the operation of disengaging the cinema-object from the imaginary and winning it for the symbolic. Before ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, *Cinéthique* had already noted the value of Metz’s work for the political analysis of cinema while lamenting his failure to follow through on it, but now the link to an Althusserian Marxist film criticism seemed more direct. In addition, Althusser’s conception of Marxist science as external to ideology seemed to authorize a continuation of Metz’s ethos of theoretical rigour in the name of revolutionary criticism.

But in other, more explicitly Althusserian forms of ideological criticism, there was no attempt to hide a prescriptive dimension, coupling the criticism of dominant forms of cinema that effaced their marks of enunciation with a call for new forms of political cinema, forms that accomplished the very thing that Metz said theory was meant to do: wrest the symbolic from the imaginary. Peter Wollen, for example, brought together Metz’s conception of theory with Bertolt Brecht’s idea of political theatre to advocate a materialist cinema that countered ideology. According to Wollen, ‘Brecht wanted to find a concept of “representation” which would account for a passage from perception/recognition to knowledge/understanding, from

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16 Metz, *Imaginary Signifier*, p. 3.
the imaginary to the symbolic’. Wollen took the terms of Metz’s conception of theory and suggested that it could be realized within a film – a gesture never found explicitly in Metz’s own work. Indeed, for Wollen and others, an aesthetic operation within a film could unite the three strands of theoretical inquiry – making the spectator aware of the structure of the film, his or her position watching it, and the larger historical and ideological conditions within which the film was produced.

This distinction between Metz’s work and that of writers influenced by him (including the editors of Cinéthique, Peter Wollen, and others) should make it clear that there was no unified concept that we might call ‘Theory’ held by 1970s film theory. We have rather a cluster or constellation of concerns that constitute a shared project that revolves around a will to theory but that never reaches anything like that third stage anticipated by Metz or Willemen where we pass from methodological pluralism into a true, not syncretic, synthesis in which diverse methods are profoundly reconciled.

The idea that Theory is some kind of unified discourse may be largely a construction of the enemies of the political and epistemological commitments of 1970s film theory. With that in mind, it is worth investigating two dominant forms of the rejection of Althusserian-Lacanian and semiotic theory in American film studies. The first is the charge that 1970s film theory was ‘Grand Theory’, a woolly term adopted by David Bordwell that has unfortunately been appropriated uncritically even by a number of film academics whose positions are at odds with Bordwell. He used the term in his contribution to a 1996 volume called Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies, a volume that he co-edited with Noël Carroll. The editors proposed ‘piecemeal theory’ or ‘middle-level research’ in opposition to what they took as the outsized ambitions and outright mystification of the dominant currents of film theory.

Bordwell’s use of the term ‘Grand Theory’ is in opposition to its original meaning in a way that is instructive. C. Wright Mills coined the term in The Sociological Imagination to refer to the work of Talcott Parsons. Abstract, anti-empirical, and solely descriptive, the ‘grand theory’ (Mills, unlike Bordwell, did not capitalize the term) of Parsons’s work was placed in opposition to any form of critical theory in the Marxian tradition that would seek to challenge the status quo and would in any way be normative or

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17 Peter Wollen, “Ontology” and “Materialism” in Film’, Screen, 17, 1 (1976), 7-25 (pp. 18-19).
prescriptive. Since Bordwell objects in particular to the way in which theory was understood as hermeneutics, he has clearly departed from this conception. Instead, he uses the term ‘Grand Theory’ most prominently to refer to discourses, such as Marxism and psychoanalysis (Paul Ricœur’s ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’), that rooted all theory in terms of history and subjectivity and were therefore in strict opposition to what Mills called grand theory.

If there is any consistency to Bordwell’s understanding of the ‘Grand’ part of ‘Grand Theory’, it is not in the idea of a specific kind of theory but in a specific use of it – theory taken as a totalizing, infallible doctrine that is then laid like a grid over its object of analysis. As we have seen, this was in every respect contrary to Metz’s conception of theoretical investigation. If Metz, more than anyone else, was the central figure for an idea of theory that so-called post-theory was intended to topple, it is also ironic, as D.N. Rodowick points out, that he exemplified many of the very traits that Bordwell and his co-editor Noël Carroll demanded of good theorizing in opposition to Grand Theory. Metz proceeded by way of delimiting his object, and insisted on a descriptive – as opposed to prescriptive – theory, a theory that sought answers to clearly posed questions. He also defined a theoretical trajectory as a research programme open to objections, to refinement, with the goal of progress toward a unified theory still to come.

The objection that the post-theorists (whether those influenced by analytic philosophy or cognitivist psychology) have to Theory is articulated in the name of sober scholarship and research and is posed on epistemological grounds. Yet there is another recent tendency that objects to Theory as an injustice done to films and to the spectator. It uses against him Metz’s admission that theory’s relation to cinema is necessarily sadistic, and seeks restitution. The grounds are less epistemological than ethical and, in some cases, even metaphysical.

This second tendency might be seen as an inversion of Metz’s definition of theory in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’. In recent decades, it often seems as if the dominant assumption of writing on the moving image is that the goal is to disengage it from the symbolic and restore it to the imaginary.

22 Rodowick, Elegy for Theory, p. 200.
23 Metz, Imaginary Signifier, p. 15.
The ‘imaginary’ as a concept is out of favour, in part through the influence of Deleuze and post-theory, so we might say instead that the goal is to restore cinema to its immanence as a heterogeneous bodily and/or cognitive experience. The keywords are affect, sensation, haptic, and tactile. We are increasingly told in insistent – if frequently vague – terms, that spectators are active; films, we are told, think and feel and are beings with bodies themselves. ‘The body’ has become something of a mantra. As Friedrich Kittler observed in 1999, ‘There seem to be entire branches of scholarship today that believe they have not said anything at all if they have not said the word “body” a hundred times.’24 This second tendency – which often claims, in rather loose fashion, both phenomenology and Deleuze or Bergson as allies – takes two (frequently overlapping) forms: an emphasis on 1) a bodily active spectator,25 and 2) the film seen as having its own mode of thought, one that is not buried or hidden and in need of disengagement but singular and immanent to the film itself.26

It should be mentioned that this shift is further complicated by questions about the shift in the object itself and whether the narrative feature film – Metz’s ‘king’s highway of expression’27 – can still be considered our dominant mode of film experience. Lev Manovich, for example, suggested over a decade ago that we needed to add ‘live-action’ to the list of implicit features characterizing the object that Metz had marked out for analysis – an object that, according to Manovich, we could safely confine to what cinema was in the 20th century but would no longer be in the 21st.28

II.

The decline of Metz’s influence in English-language film studies might be seen to correlate with a rise in Deleuze’s influence. But Deleuze’s relation to these newer tendencies in film studies and film-philosophy is more complicated than it may first appear. As I will argue, Deleuze stands in relation to the newer philosophical turn as Metz did to 1970s film theory:

25 Representatives of this current include Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks, Steven Shaviro, and many others.
26 See, for example, Daniel Frampton’s Filmosophy, analyzed below.
he is at once a central influence on this trend and at odds with its dominant tendencies.

If Deleuze has replaced Metz as perhaps the most common reference point in contemporary film studies, we must however note that there was a substantial lag. From the point of view of debates in academic film studies in the 1980s and 1990s, the arrival of Deleuze’s two books on cinema seemed to be of no help to anyone. Offering a complex engagement with the history of Western film theory, the books also rejected the terminology that defined the central concerns of film theory at the time – dismissing all manner of Saussurian semiological approaches, psychoanalysis, and the language of ideology critique. At the same time, Deleuze’s project was implicitly even more antagonistic to any form of cultural studies, on the one hand, or the kind of piecemeal descriptive theory of the sort promoted by the so-called post-theorists on the other.

As one example, Bordwell and Carroll’s *Post-Theory* volume of 1996 could have treated Deleuze as either an ally of a sort for his opposition to linguistic and psychoanalytic approaches, or as a new antagonist – yet another French master thinker adopted uncritically as an absolute authority in opposition to careful scholarship. But there is not a single reference to Deleuze’s books on cinema in the volume. A second example: a book entitled *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill and published in 2000, was presented as an attempt to assess the state of film studies at the time. Situating itself, unlike *Post-Theory*, as not strictly anti-theory, it nonetheless saw its mission tied to the fact that ‘film theory [...] can no longer be the kind of overarching, “grand” theory that flourished in the 1970s.’ Once again, the book never mentions Deleuze.

But something has happened since then. As I’m writing this, two decades since Metz’s passing, there have been twenty English-language books devoted exclusively to Deleuze and cinema, eighteen of which came out in the last decade and twelve in the last three years.

What is Deleuze’s relation to the tradition of 1970s film theory inaugurated by Metz? Deleuze proposes a reversal of the traditional relation between film and theory. His aim is not to work out a theory of film but instead to think of film as, in effect, theory, a mode of thought, a specific means for creating ideas that can give rise to the creation of new concepts within philosophy. Deleuze’s cinema books, though they engage with film

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30 These statistics are based on my own survey on Amazon.com.
theory, are not within its lineage because they have no interest in film as cultural production or systematizable signifying practice, only as a way of thinking – as a specific aesthetic way of realizing ideas through percepts and affects or, more specifically in cinema’s case, through movement and time. Beginning most explicitly in *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze attempted to construct an ‘image of thought’ that inverts the basic methodology of Freudo-Marxism in French structuralist theories by suggesting that the limited ‘critique of representation’ practiced in these discourses already gives priority to representation over the singularities that representation appropriates. By affirming Bergson’s equivalence between image and matter and by offering cinema, *contra* Bergson, as the realization of this equivalence, Deleuze treats the problematic of representation that much of 1970s film theory revolved around as a false problem. Deleuze may also be seen to be inverting the Althusserian re-reading of Metz: rather than breaking us out of immediacy through distancing and shifting from understanding to knowledge, Deleuze wished to eliminate the distance between the viewer and the screen. Deleuze’s model is the other pole of modernist theatre – Artaud rather than Brecht.

Beyond the many books devoted to explicating or applying Deleuze’s cinema books, there has also been a veritable explosion of new film philosophies that take Deleuze as an inspiration. I’ll briefly touch on one symptomatic example, a 2006 book by Daniel Frampton called *Filmosophy*. The title itself attempts to close the circle – not theories or philosophies of film but film as philosophy, philosophy as film: filmosophy. The concept of filmosophy is meant to be a way of writing about film as purely immanent thinking and feeling. Neither hermeneutics nor historicization nor ideology critique is relevant to filmosophy. There is no point in revealing codes or filmic systems because there is no source, no outside, no recourse to a ‘language of representation’ or to filmmaker or spectator that needs to be called upon to speak of the cinema effect. Cinema for Frampton cannot be thought of as reflexive or in terms of excess, supplement, void, or lack because all these concepts betray the film’s own immanent expression. The language of production and technology adopted by film studies is therefore taking what a film does or is and recoding it in a language of representation that refers only to how it was made. ‘We should not be taught to see “zooms”’

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and “tracking shots”, but led to understand intensities and movements of feeling and thinking.” This may sound Deleuzian, but what does it mean to be ‘led to understand’ something that Frampton will have to claim that we already understand? In Frampton’s words, ‘We do not need instruction in how to “read” film, we only need a better language of those moving sound-images – we are already well suited to understanding film.’ That we are already suited to understanding film was, of course, one of the central objects of Metz’s own inquiry. But for Frampton, this is not a fact we need to understand. Ultimately, Frampton’s argument can only affirm a kind of transparency of images in the pure self-sufficiency of what he calls the ‘filmind’. Because why do we need a language for these images at all if language applies a representational over-coding to images that are always already their own ‘filmosophy’?

To get out of this tautology, which would seem to negate the need for his own project, Frampton affirms a poetics of interpretation. ‘The film [...] might be said to be crying in empathy, sweating out loud, feeling pain for the character. The concept of the filmind should provoke these kinds of interpretations.’ What Deleuze attempts to create is a semiotics of moving images that presupposes an importance for philosophy as a creative practice separate from cinema; Frampton’s Deleuzian reading is finally interested only in a descriptive language (generously termed poetic) that is still analogical and vague. Before we start ‘sweating out loud’, this ‘better language’ can be deferred in favour of a back and forth between speculative utopian claims that may sound vaguely Deleuzian, affirming film’s equivalence to mind, and a repetitive insistence on the way academic ‘film theory’ re-territorializes the immanent singularities or intensities of film’s own creative power. Pier Paolo Pasolini once claimed that theory was needed to avoid the ‘obscure ontological background that involves explaining cinema with cinema’. Frampton’s manifesto is on behalf of that obscure ontological background – a vulgar romanticism in opposition to a vulgar formalism.

That certain claims by Deleuze might be used in an attempt to give authority to this project is not difficult to understand. According to Deleuze, ‘no technical determination, whether applied (psychoanalysis, linguistics)}
or reflexive, is sufficient to constitute the concepts of cinema itself. He is not interested in causal arguments or the technical means to create specific effects. He is interested in the effects themselves as conditions for thought. Cinema, he writes, is ‘neither a language system nor a language. It is a plastic mass, an a-signifying and a-syntactic material, a material not formed linguistically [...]. It is not an enunciation, and these are not utterances.’ So what does philosophy have to say about cinema? Deleuze tells us that ‘[c]inema’s concepts are not given in cinema’. Rather, ‘[c]inema itself is a new practice of images and signs, whose theory philosophy must produce as conceptual practice’. In other words, philosophy uses its own creative power to reflect upon the effects of cinema on thought.

Winning the cinematic object for the symbolic came to stand for the attempt to restore to cinema its absent causes and conditions of possibility. In this narrative, our experience of cinema as cinema was predicated on the effacement of what produced the image, which manifested itself in various forms: the properties of the apparatus itself and modes of perception embedded in it, the material substrate of the film, the photogram, the subject of enunciation, and finally History itself. The heterogeneity of this list made for numerous arguments and, in some cases, slippages about what constituted materialism in cinema. Even if there was no unanimity in the response to the goals of theory and political cinema, there was at least a framework for debate that presumed that there was nothing natural about cinema or narrative conventions. Film theory, on the one hand, and the New Waves and avant-gardes, on the other, were then needed to rescue cinema from the illusion of transparency.

Turning our attention to effaced mechanisms, showing up the film work, revealing the marks of enunciation – be it through breaking down the illusion of movement, the return of sprocket holes, or the return of the gaze – is of no interest to Deleuze, because for Deleuze nothing has been effaced. Deleuze announces in the introduction to *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* that ‘cinema is always as perfect as it can be’. Or in an interview: ‘Every image is literal and must be taken literally.’42 The equivalence of matter and

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38 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 29.
39 Ibid.
40 I.e. the film frame considered as a still image.
41 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. x (preface).
image is also an identification of matter and its movement and temporality, being and becoming. The movement-image undoes the distinction between psychical and physical reality. There are no components of the movement-image that can be isolated to reveal how cinema works because ‘[c]inema begins with the movement-image – not with any “relation” between image and movement; cinema creates a self-moving image’. Deleuze takes the famous maxim of Husserl’s phenomenology that ‘consciousness is always consciousness of something’ and argues that Bergson goes further by proposing that ‘consciousness is something’. Hence an image, as a form of consciousness, has an autonomy and materiality that is only obscured by bringing in questions about a ‘subject of enunciation’. To preserve the creative power of the new sign grasped as image, Deleuze rejects the Saussurian distinction between signifier and signified as well as the distinction made by Metz between imaginary and the symbolic.

Deleuze’s objection to Metz, and to semiology more generally, is that it subordinates movement-images to narrative and structure. Deleuze argues that cinema always has narrative and structure but movement-images are primary and make up narrative, which is only a secondary effect. Meanwhile, according to Deleuze, to make cinema into images composed of utterances is to immobilize the image.

Cinema, Deleuze tells us, automatically gives us the movement-image. And yet, he also tells us that the movement-image needs to be created. Cinema that gives us a movement-image or a time-image is cinema as art – art understood as one of the three domains of creative practice in What is Philosophy?, along with science and philosophy itself. He excuses what he takes to be Bergson’s misreading of cinema in terms of ‘natural perception’ by acknowledging that the origins of cinema disguised its true novelty. It is only when cinema develops the resources of montage and can be attached to the name of an auteur that cinema can be cinema.

This is where philosophy comes in – providing concepts for the new kinds of images that the great works of cinema invent. Cinema, when it is art, creates percepts and affects through blocks of movement and time, but it doesn’t create concepts. As he puts it,

44 Deleuze, Cinema 1, p. 56.
45 Deleuze, Cinema 2, p. 27.
47 Deleuze, Cinema 1, p. 3.
Film criticism faces twin dangers: it shouldn’t just describe films but nor should it apply to them concepts taken from outside film. The job of criticism is to form concepts that aren’t of course ‘given’ in films but nonetheless relate specifically to cinema, and to some specific genre of film [...] Concepts specific to cinema, but which can only be formed philosophically. 48

At some level, Deleuze faces the same problem as Metz. How can theory supplement cinema without betraying it? Both Metz and Deleuze sought a discourse on cinema that was not a mode of judgment nor a mode of interpretation nor explanatory generalizations about how film functions but rather constructions of the thinker that provide a supplement by way of classification. But ultimately they weren’t writing about the same object – the good object that the ordinary spectator seeks to preserve, which Metz wished to turn into an object for knowledge by treating it as a signifying practice, does not intersect with the art of movement and time that for Deleuze conditions a philosophy of images and signs. In Metz’s terms, we might say that what had ‘pertinence’ for Metz’s investigation did not have it for Deleuze, and vice versa.

III.

So where does this leave us? How do we turn this parallel montage into a last-minute rescue? To return to my title, this question of ‘with’, or of relation, is for both Metz and Deleuze a central one: namely, what is the relation between cinema and conceptual thought, or between the imaginary and the symbolic? The challenge is to understand the relation of what Lacan called a non-relation or what Deleuze called a ‘disjunctive synthesis’. 49 And I wonder if we might not do this for Metz and Deleuze themselves.

The motive force in Deleuze is ambiguously located between, on the one hand, an emphasis on the creative production of new images, and on the other, a restoration of perception and affection to a world from which it has been obscured. Deleuze makes this most explicit in speaking of digital and electronic images, when images become legible, not visible. ‘Redemption, art beyond knowledge, is also creation beyond information.’ What is needed according to Deleuze is a pedagogy that works against ‘informatics’ by

48 Deleuze, Negotiations, pp. 57-58.
setting up 'the question which goes beyond it, that of its source and that of its addressee’.50 It seems we have surreptitiously come back to the question of enunciation, to which Deleuze had objected in Metz’s semiology. But we are not tied here to a simplified aesthetic of political modernism in which any gesture toward the apparatus can be read as necessarily politically radical. Rather, we may be in a place where we can think about an interrelation of Metz’s project and Deleuze’s project in a way that may challenge what I take to be the general lack of politics in many current modes of film theory and film-philosophy.

Today we find film theories that adhere to Metz’s principles of posing answerable questions in respect to a circumscribed object. But this piecemeal theory has forsaken Metz’s larger ambitions of an integrated theory that would ultimately be able to understand the relation between the dominant codes and conventions of mainstream cinema and the specific forms of desire inspired by cinema in terms of broader social, cultural, and historical forces. Meanwhile, new forms of film-philosophy inspired by Deleuze are too often tied to a bodily materialism, a romantic conception of art, or vague metaphysical speculations while forsaking the labour of conceptualization that for Deleuze needed to be a form of political resistance to the society of control and a world that we are losing the capacity to believe in.

Metz suspended the question of ideology critique because he saw the question of the relation to economy and the social and historical world as involving too many additional variables to be immediately linked to the goal of a rigorous theory of the film text and its relation to the spectator. But by providing the tools to begin thinking toward the progressive comprehension of signification in dominant cinema, he opened the door to theories of counter-cinema and ideological analysis. Deleuze, on the other hand, suspended the reading of dominant cinema, but he attempted to think the ways that cinema could challenge the reign of information and communication in the electronic age. Both Deleuze and Metz insisted on the political implications of the analysis of cinema while also avoiding the critique of cinema in favour of an attempt to conceptualize the signs that compose it. By thinking the disjunctive relation between what can be known about dominant modes of cinema at the level of signification and cinema’s capacity to create new images and signs, we might return to the question of cinema’s politics in a new way.

50 Deleuze, Cinema 2, p. 270.
About the author

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