Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

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23. ‘I Never Expected Semiology to Thrill the Masses’

Interview with Christian Metz

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Abstract

This interview, which the two young film scholars conducted with Metz in Paris in 1990, focuses on Metz’s work on his last book, L’énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film (1991), which he had brought up for discussion during his seminars beginning in 1986. At the same time, the conversation revolves around the historical evolution of the film-semiological approach and its limits as well as the relation between film theory and film analysis. Metz also talks about his relationship with theory, his scholarly attitude, and his love of film.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, film phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory of cinema, enunciation theory, cinephilia

This interview with Christian Metz was conducted by Dominique Blüher and Margrit Tröhler in Paris in 1990. It was first published in German in the Swiss magazine Filmbulletin, 2 (1990), pp. 51-55, then reprinted in the Newsletter of the German Association of Film Scholars Film- und Fernseh-wissenschaftliche Mitteilungen, 3/4 (1990), and translated into Dutch by Paul Verstraten for Versus, 3 (1991).

Christian, we’ve been wanting to ask you this for a long time: where does your interest in film theory come from?

One day, two things from my youth came together: for one thing, I’ve been a film buff since I was about fifteen, sixteen; by the time of the liberation of
France, I already belonged to a film club in the small provincial town in Southern France where I grew up. The other thing was that I became interested in linguistics very early on, inspired by my father who was a professor of German philology. He was German by birth and I actually grew up bilingually, but I later forgot how to speak German – that has to do with oedipal issues... So my father gave me books on linguistics to read, especially Meillet and Vendryes,¹ and I was totally fascinated. For an adolescent, these kinds of books are actually easier to understand than literature such as Marcel Proust, for instance.

So I had a strong interest in two things, but they stayed completely separate in my mind for a long time. And then, one day, I brought together my penchant for the theoretical with my passion for cinema. I was thirty years old at the time. And when I started work on my writings, the influence of Roland Barthes became very important to me, but especially the way he interacted with people.

Semiology and Theory of Film

*In France, it is now common to speak of the ‘theory of film’ rather than the ‘semiology of film’ (as we can see with the title of the colloquium in Cerisy, ‘Christian Metz et la théorie du cinéma’, for example).* ² Are these terms synonyms for you?

Definitely not synonyms. Semiology is only one possible theoretical approach. But the two terms were considered nearly synonymous in France during the 1960s and 1970s because semiology was so dominant within theory. That’s no longer the case today: semiology triggered the development of theoretical works in various directions. So we now have many theoretical approaches that are not semiological, and that’s a very good thing.

What characterizes the semiological approach?

Above all, the attention given to the signifier of the film. Before attending to the plot, the psychology of the characters, the representation of the social

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¹ See, for instance, their joint work, Antoine Meillet and Joseph Vendryes, *Traité de grammaire comparée des langues classiques* (Paris: Editions Champion, 1924), and Joseph Vendryes, ‘Langage oral et langage par geste’, in *Journal de Psychologie normale et pathologique*, XLIII (1950), pp. 7-33. [All notes were added for the present publication. They specify references made by Christian Metz during the interview in 1990.]

² The conference proceedings were published in *Iris*, 10 (special issue *Christian Metz et la théorie du cinéma / Christian Metz and Film Theory*, ed. by Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, 1990).
setting, semiology examines the way the images and sounds are deployed in a film: the editing, the sequencing (découpage), the movement of the camera, and so on – that’s mainly what distinguishes semiology from other approaches. To me, semiology means above all the examination of the signifier in the sense of Barthes, probably the only person to whom I feel indebted intellectually. To this, I would add two more, secondary characteristics: the willingness to consider insights from linguistics as a discipline devoted to the signifier and an openness regarding psychoanalysis, because this includes a reflection on the signifier, as Lacan said in his brilliantly crazy manner, or, as he could have said, it is itself such a reflection.

Would you agree in calling the semiological approach a scientific one?

I don’t like to use the word ‘scientific’. First, because it would suggest that semiology is a fully developed science, which isn’t the case (and this is true of all fields in the arts and humanities). And second, the argument of ‘scientificity’ can be abused to justify the dogmatic, normative pressure of a ‘school’ and of an intellectual dictatorship, which is another reason why I don’t like the word ‘scientific’. But of course, the semiological practice is characterized by a striving for ‘scientificity’. Personally, I prefer to speak of a ‘striving for accuracy’.

What does this ‘striving for accuracy’ mean for your work, specifically?

To be aware of every step you take. For example, you can propose a very adventurous hypothesis, provided that you’re aware of it and you say so. I also mean a certain moral stance in scholarly interaction: to discuss differences in opinion as objectively as possible, without getting personal, and to cite the names and sources on which you base your arguments. Another aspect is to pursue an idea to the end, quite literally, with the greatest possible coherence. For my part, I’ve pursued every idea for years: I’ve been working on ‘enunciation in film’ for four years now, and I’m far from finished with it.

Does striving for accuracy in scholarly work also include developing a terminology?

In practice, I’m against a terminology that is harder to understand than the subject under discussion. But of course, you’re forced to name the things you observe, since the phenomenon doesn’t exist without the word; if the
term ‘voice-over’ didn’t exist, we couldn’t discuss the various manifestations of this voice.

Going to the movies and approaching cinema theoretically – are you still able to link these two activities?

Yes, of course! Except in the first case you consume, enjoy, experience; and in the second, you analyze the film afterwards. It’s basically like in real life: you go to bed with your lover, and afterwards you analyze their character – sort of an extension of the pleasure.

**History, Economy, and Film Analysis**

We would like to return to the differences between theoretical approaches: which aspects of film or cinema does semiology describe, and which aspects need to be accounted for with other methods? In other words: what are the limits of the semiological approach?

I think semiology can explain everything that Saussure calls ‘internal analysis’, that is, the construction of the film, the relationships between the motifs, the form of the signifier, the form of the signified, the content, and so on: everything that has to do with the internal structure of the film.

But semiology, the way I understand it, is a ‘modest’ discipline, which doesn’t cover all areas: the history of film, for instance, should be approached with historical methods. History seems an essential discipline to me when it comes to examining the external aspects of film, such as the relationship between film and society during a specific period: what did it mean when the Communist Party financed a film by Jean Renoir in France in 1936? Also, there are the economic factors of cinema: the monetary flow is an extremely complicated issue, and cinema doesn’t compare to other industries in this respect (René Bonnel works in this field in France, for instance, or Douglas Gomery in the US).³

Another approach I would like to mention is psychoanalysis. There are two distinct tendencies here: an approach that deals with the psychoanalysis of the characters, the plot, or the author and thus says something

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about the social significance of the film (as is done in literary criticism). Or the direction I have taken myself (and I am by no means the only one): the psychoanalysis of cinema as an *institution*, that is, of the camera, the projector, the seats in the theatre, the screen – of the entire ‘cinema machine’ or *dispositif*, the cinematic apparatus. This is related to semiology because it is the psychoanalysis of the ‘code’: in this sense, it belongs to the internal analysis. In the 1970s, I initiated this field of inquiry together with Jean-Louis Baudry. Today, it is less common in France, though Marc Vernet still works on it. But it is mostly the Anglo-American feminist theorists who do great work in this area, sometimes combining the two possibilities of discussing psychoanalysis in relation to cinema.

*There is another, less theoretical semiological activity: film analysis. Can you say a few words about that?*

The ‘textual analysis’ of film, as it is also called, ideally examines every single shot of a film. In France, Marie-Claire Ropars and Raymond Bellour began analyzing film in this way around the same time. Marie-Claire Ropars was increasingly guided by Derrida’s works, whereas Raymond Bellour was largely inspired by semiology. Since the 1970s, the textual analysis of film has become widespread in France.

But in essence, it has dealt with the same issues as film theory. In *Language and Cinema*, I said that one can either examine a film in all its ‘codes’ (film analysis) or trace a ‘code’ across several films (film theory). By and large, I still believe that. For my current work, for instance, I discussed the various forms of the ‘subjective shot’ during several successive seminars. In this case, I start from theoretical possibilities in the sense of logical considerations, and then I analyze specific film sequences with respect to

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their subjective shots. The films are a corpus for me (but also a body that I love), where I fish for examples. I’m an abstract person, I think in concepts. If I start with a specific film, I’m paralyzed. I cannot express my love for film that way.

But the theoretical and analytical activities are essentially the same. I think the differences are often overemphasized, even though the one cannot manage without the other. An example of the combination of the two activities is Pierre Sorlin’s remarkable work in *Sociologie du cinéma*, which he sadly didn’t pursue any further.8 His intention was to base the sociology of cinema on textual analysis.

*So would you say that semiology requires interdisciplinarity?*

Interdisciplinarity is surely talked about, but in practice, it is hard to realize. Even just raising the required money is difficult... I’m rather sceptical myself; I think interdisciplinarity is only possible if the scholars have excellent knowledge of at least two fields, otherwise the discussion will be at a very low level. But of course, semiology as such is interdisciplinary, as it consists of at least three heterogeneous fields: linguistics, film theory, and psychoanalysis.

*It is exactly this combination of linguistics and psychoanalysis that characterizes your work. Why these approaches? Where do you see their commonalities and what is their connection with cinema?*

I’m going to start with the last question: they have no special connection to cinema. They are two disciplines that are connected with everything, not just cinema but also literature, painting, or simply everyday life.

Well, what they have in common: they are the two disciplines interested in meaning as such. Of course, all scholarly disciplines deal with meaning, but these are the only ones dealing with the ‘meaning of meaning’ (though psychoanalysis is not a theoretical discipline as such). So they are very close to each other, contrary to all appearances.

However, linguistics, and its extension in rhetoric or narratology, deals with the ‘secondary process’ in the Freudian sense, and psychoanalysis with the ‘primary process’.

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Shouldn’t we today also consider broadening the semiology of cinema to a more general theory of audiovisual media?

Yes, I think that’s absolutely necessary, considering how our society is developing. But I would like to add that a semiology of audiovisual media, or also of comics, could profit from the semiology of cinema. In order to figure out the differences, the studies in the field of cinema could be very helpful (since film theory has existed for longer and is therefore more advanced), and despite all the differences, there are a lot of commonalities.

‘Enunciation’ in Film

For four years now, you’ve been working on a new topic: enunciation in film (l’énonciation au cinéma): what does ‘enunciation’ mean and what are the commonalities and differences between linguistic and cinematic enunciation?

I’ll start with your second question: there is a fundamental difference. Linguistic enunciation is always concerned with the speech situation as examined by Benveniste and Jakobson.9 In a conversation, there are deictic words. There are many of them, but the most important ones are ‘I’ and ‘you’: they entail a real interchangeability between the conversational roles; a person is referred to as ‘I’ or ‘you’ depending on the context. And what is said influences the course of the conversation, which is redirected again and again. This contrasts with all completed works such as a novel, a film, a painting. Here, such redirecting is not possible: a spectator may find a film terrible, but it will proceed as intended. Nor is a reversal of the roles possible.

Enunciation refers to the activity, the abstract process, that creates the perceivable text: for every text, there is a production process generating the words or images and so forth. Thus, the enunciated (énoncé) presupposes the act of enunciation.

The enunciation can be opposed to the enunciated: if Jean says ‘Pierre has come’, then Jean is the subject of the enunciation and Pierre is the subject of the enunciated. Pragmatics, narratology, and linguistics all deal with this issue. If we read a novel by Jules Verne, for instance, then Jules Verne as a person is not present during the reading; yet there is a force advancing...

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the action, a production – yes, production, for I’m a materialist – talking to the reader, otherwise they wouldn’t be reading the novel. But the reader has no counterpart they could talk to. Of course, Jules Verne did write this book in a physical sense, but at the symbolic level, he’s not the producer, because the symbolic, the social, is happening now: the enunciation in the completed work happens at the moment of reading. That’s the same with film: the enunciation manifests itself at the moment when someone views the film, without them having any influence on what is enunciated.

And while enunciation in a live conversation happens primarily through deixis, it is expressed through metadiscursive elements in completed works: we only have the discours revealing itself as such by referring to itself. This happens through an autoreferentiality (repli autoréférentiel) that can take many shapes.

**How does one recognize these metadiscursive elements in film?**

The enunciation leaves traces, but it is basically merged with the film and carries the text. We can only perceive a very small part of enunciation directly. In linguistics, these traces are called ‘markers’. To avoid misunderstandings, I prefer to call them ‘configurations’. In French, marque is too closely associated with a small, isolated detail in the corner of an image. ‘Configuration’ seems more appropriate to me, because enunciation is often apparent in the overall organization of a shot, in its force lines, so to speak. However, there are examples that justify the word marque, such as a fade-out or cross-fade, or any punctuation of the film that can be localized. But in a subjective shot, for instance, there are no features that can be localized – where does the subjectivity of the shot come from? It emerges through the force lines of the entire shot, the framing of the image, the point-of-view of a character.

**Can you give some other examples?**

I could list over a hundred configurations. But I can also group them a little, if only provisionally. One group would concern everything related to spectatorial address: the look into the camera; the voice of the person on screen addressing us (here, we can additionally distinguish between weak and strong address, that is, with or without the use of the second person); an off-screen voice or a written address (as in intertitles). Also everything that points to the image as such (as a rectangle) or to the screen (windows, paintings, mirrors, etc.), or the film-within-a-film in its numerous
manifestations – that’s the configuration of cinematic self-reflexivity *par excellence*. Another group consists of all the moments that stage elements of the cinematic apparatus: the showing of a camera or a spotlight, as in avant-garde cinema, to mark the film as a film. Further, everything that Michel Chion calls ‘subjective sound’, as well as the first-person voice, that is, the character narrating their experiences in a voice-over.\(^\text{10}\)

But also what Francesco Casetti calls the ‘objective, unreal image’, which I would rather call ‘objectively oriented’: these are strongly marked configurations of the film that cannot be attributed to a person within the narrative (contrasting montage, high and low-angle shots, or the ‘unleashed camera’).\(^\text{11}\) That’s about it for now, though I’ve probably forgotten some.

**Forms of Enunciation or Narrative Forms?**

*How does the perspective of enunciation theory differ from that of narratology? Or, to put it differently: how can you distinguish typical forms of enunciation from typical narrative forms?*

The two terms are obviously not the same, because narratology only refers to narrative works. But in those works, the two forms coincide, because enunciation consists of narration. Essentially, narration and enunciation can be differentiated along two axes: when a work is non-narrative, like certain documentaries, or rather, experimental films (for example, Peter Gidal’s 45 minutes of black screen),\(^\text{12}\) where we obviously still have enunciation. Second, in written text, there is the traditional distinction between linguistic phenomena (persons, tenses, verbs – which correspond to enunciation), and the art and technique of writing a novel (the choice of a narrative point of view; the presence or absence of an explicit narrator; the time in which the story is told). The latter are narrative forms in the strict sense. But if you look closely, it becomes more complicated, since the


12 Metz seems to be mistaken here: we have not been able to identify a film by Peter Gidal corresponding to this short description, nor has our research led to any results beyond Gidal’s work. However, Martin Lefebvre has found some notes by Metz on Gidal’s films *Room Film* (UK 1973) and *Close up* (UK 1983), where the filmmaker’s experiments with the filmic image tend, at least momentarily, to a black screen. We thank Martin Lefebvre for this information.
author uses language to write the novel. Thus, the narrative forms can only be realized through linguistic means (the verb tenses, the adverbs, the use of ‘I’ or ‘he/she/it’, and so on). But in principle, the two categories can be distinguished.

But to return to film: in the case of a narrative film, we have a work that is not linguistic, not based on a language system, because film is not a langue (aside from the dialogue spoken in the film). In the fiction film, narration creates the structure and thus also the enunciation. At the same time, the enunciation is solely dedicated to telling a story. In short, enunciation becomes narration and narration becomes enunciation. But only in this case. In non-linguistic narrative works, narration coincides with enunciation. But enunciation is the more comprehensive term, because it encompasses non-narrative works too.

**The Neutral Image and Transparency**

*If every image presupposes an enunciation, as you put it, then there is no such thing as a neutral or ‘objective’ image. And yet, you and others talk about the configuration of the ‘neutral image’.*

The crucial point about the neutral image is that it doesn’t really exist, since every shot in a film presupposes a choice of parameters. But if you want to define an image, you cannot help describing it with reference to the neutral image. However, the neutral image is a myth, comparable to the zero in mathematics. Each configuration must be understood as a deviation from an implicit, unmarked, mythical, and precise point. If you think of the off-screen voice as something special and remarkable, then that means that the on-screen voice is seen as the normal, the neutral. The same goes for the look into the camera, which is always a token of enunciation; this means that it appears unmarked, neutral, if a character looks somewhere else than into the camera. Nevertheless, a cinema lover recognizes very well what a neutral image is, which is defined historically, with reference to a period and genre. Take the ending of a classic Western as an example: our hero, in three-quarter shot, is riding toward a stony hill, a male voice is heard singing or humming off-screen – it cannot be any other way. That’s a neutral image. A female voice in this case would completely change the shot, would mark it, and it wouldn’t be a neutral image anymore. In this sense, the neutral image is a convention with respect to a country, a period, a genre – but empirically, it doesn’t exist as such.
So, if Hollywood cinema aims not to mark its images as such, then we could say that it claims the neutrality, or ‘transparency’ of its images?

Yes, but this ‘transparency’ is not an objective concept. It is the spectator’s subjective impression, and as such, it is significant, even though it’s basically a false impression. It is true that transparency has also been the goal of certain filmmakers, of a certain cinema. But, as David Bordwell has shown, this goal can never be reached. And, as he has also demonstrated, not all classical Hollywood films aspired to this transparency, either.

*Do you believe in the possibility of ‘distancing’ or ‘estrangement’, for instance by showing the elements of the cinematic apparatus?*

Distancing effects are also features of enunciation. But I think that the spectator often assimilates them into the diegesis, that is, they give them a meaning at the level of the story, because the pleasure derived from the story is stronger. To *really* create an ‘estrangement effect’, the structure of the entire film needs to be devised towards estrangement. It’s not enough to show a camera or a spotlight.

*A very general question to conclude: when you began your work on the semiology of film in the early 1960s, film studies in general was not a highly developed field yet. Since then, the movement has spread and developed in many different directions; but we wonder if the semiological approach doesn’t remain very much limited to academia.*

It’s true that semiology has mostly developed in the academic context. But various aspects of semiology, such as the increased attention given to the signifier or the structure of works, are being carried out into the world by former students working in various fields.

The circulation of my books and their translations seem rather high to me for specialized literature (*Language and Cinema* and *The Imaginary Signifier* have reached 15,000 copies in France, and 100,000 copies including their translations). This shows that semiology is not limited to academia.

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But you’re right, the academic connection is strong and, I’d like to add, understandable and normal, as can be seen with all difficult and specialized subject areas – just think of crystallography…

On the other hand, I’m satisfied if just a few ideas from a book I write stick in the readers’ heads. That’s completely normal, all communication entails an enormous loss of information. I never expected semiology to be very widely disseminated; I wasn’t keen on that, either. I never wanted to ‘manufacture’ semiologists. My aim was to raise awareness for the construction of films, for what I call the cinematic signifier. This also goes back to Barthes’ influence.

Maybe another partial answer is that a discipline that questions the transparency of the cinematic signifier, that investigates and dissects the tools (language, images, and so on) we use on daily basis, will always be unpopular: who wants to destroy their beloved toys? Such a discipline is predestined to stir up resistance against itself. If you tell people, ‘look how this cinema, claiming to be so transparent and leading you to believe its stories, is characterized by the act of enunciation (its production and ideology),’ then people won’t be pleased. This resistance has to do with the subject matter of cinema itself. And that’s another reason why I never expected semiology to thrill the masses.

_Translated from German by Susie Trenka_

_About the authors_

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About the translator

Susie Trenka completed her PhD entitled Jumping the Color Line: Vernacular Jazz Dance in American Film, 1929–1945 at the University of Zurich, where she was also a research assistant, lecturer, and translator in the Department of Film Studies. She now lives in New Orleans, working as a freelance translator, film critic/writer, and swing dance teacher.