

5. Thinking Cinema

Christian Metz and/in the Tradition of Film Theory

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Abstract

Christian Metz once stated that he had always worked ‘in the company’ of the film theorists whose work preceded the turn towards a semiotics of cinema inspired by structuralist semiotics. This chapter tries to understand which ‘canon’ of film theory can be found in Metz’s own writings. Who are the authors he refers to and in what way does he build upon their ideas to develop his semiotics of cinema? In the second part, the example of the so-called ‘impression of reality’ shows how Metz reframes a problem discussed widely in the 1950s from a semiotic perspective. The final part is dedicated to Metz’s reading of Rudolf Arnheim’s *Film als Kunst* in his seminars of 1982 and 1983.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, classical film theory, filmology, history of film theory, impression of reality

In an interview that Paul Verstraten and I conducted with Christian Metz in 1986, we asked him about the relation he saw between his own work as a semiologist and the tradition of film theory, to which he so amply referred in his writings. In his answer he affirmed that he always felt that he worked ‘in the company’ of those theorists, whom he admired and was profoundly interested in. He also observed that in this respect he considered himself something like a ‘traditionalist’. I think, he added, ‘that in order to innovate we need to take [these writings] up again and push things further.’¹ So, in a way, Metz stated here that the problems he dealt with in his own research

¹ Frank Kessler and Paul Verstraten, ‘Het verleden en heden van de filmtheorie. Interview met Christian Metz’, *Versus*, 3 (1986), 101-14 (p. 103) (my translation).

had generally been identified by this tradition, but that he himself looked at them through a different lens: the lens of semiology, or psychoanalysis. He also mentioned in the interview that he had explicitly stated his debt to the tradition of film theory in his first important article, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’.² This essay was originally published in 1964 in the seminal fourth issue of *Communications*, which was one of the key publications of the then-emerging new wave of structuralist semiology, and contained, in addition to Metz’s text, contributions by Roland Barthes, Claude Bremond, and Tzvetan Todorov. In the conclusion to his article, Metz wrote:

These few pages were written in the belief that the time has come to start making certain conjunctions. An approach that would be derived as much from the writings of the great theoreticians of the cinema as from the studies of filmology and the methods of linguistics might, gradually – it will take a long time – begin to accomplish, in the domain of the cinema, and especially on the level of the large signifying units, the great Saussurian dream of studying the mechanisms by which human significations are transmitted in human society.³

In closing the article by launching the project of film semiology – ‘time has come for a semiotics of the cinema’⁴ – Metz actually conceived of this enterprise as a combination of three strands of thinking: classical film theory (Eisenstein, Balázs, Bazin), filmology (Cohen-Séat, Morin), and linguistics. One could add that these three strands also bring with them their own modes of questioning cinema as an object of semiology. Linguistics provides the concepts that, to begin with, allow the semiologist to interrogate the notion of a cinematic language (*langage cinématographique*). In his writings, Metz draws extensively on key structuralist theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev, but also on André Martinet, Emile Benveniste, Roman Jakobson, and many others, depending on the problems that he intends to explore.⁵

2 Christian Metz, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. by Michael Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974 [1968]), pp. 31–91.

3 Metz, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, p. 91.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 91 (in French, Metz uses the term ‘*sémiologie*’ the English translation ‘semiotics’ follows international terminological conventions).

5 On the relationship between Metz and linguistic theory, see Roger Odin, ‘Christian Metz et la linguistique’, *Iris*, 10 (1990), pp. 81–103.

From filmology, too, Metz adopts a variety of concepts, in particular the terms constituting the ‘vocabulary of filmology’ – the profilmic, diegesis, etc. – as presented by Etienne Souriau,⁶ or Gilbert Cohen-Séat’s distinction between ‘filmic fact’ and ‘cinematic fact’.⁷ In addition, Metz takes up certain problems discussed by the filmologists, such as the ‘impression of reality’, which he re-read in 1965 and re-framed in a semiological perspective.⁸ And thirdly, filmology functions as an example demonstrating how cinema as an object can be studied with scientific rigour from a variety of perspectives involving different disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology, aesthetics, etc.

Finally, the third strand: the tradition of the ‘great film theorists’ had addressed many fundamental questions that semiological theory is also concerned with, including issues of meaning (‘how to express something in such a way that the spectators can understand it immediately? how to articulate narrative space and time? etc.’) and the specificity of film as a means of expression (which is summed up so aptly in the title of André Bazin’s collected writings: *What is Cinema?*).

The difference for Metz between the two approaches of film theory and filmology seems to reside in their perspective. In the first of his two long articles dedicated to the two volumes of Jean Mitry’s *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, he states that the former – film theory – looks at cinema ‘from within’, from the point of view of critics and filmmakers, and considers it first and foremost as an art. Filmology, in contrast, considers it – as Gilbert Cohen-Séat put it – as ‘a fact’ that is, as a social, anthropological, psychological, aesthetical, etc. phenomenon to be studied with the appropriate conceptual and experimental tools made available by these disciplines.⁹ Interestingly, in ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, Metz observes that it is not quite clear whether one should consider certain authors as film theorists or as filmologists – he names Rudolf Arnheim, Albert Laffay, and, somewhat surprisingly, Jean Epstein.¹⁰ For Arnheim

6 Etienne Souriau, ‘La structure de l’univers filmique et le vocabulaire de la filmologie’, *Revue Internationale de Filmologie*, 2/7-8 (1951), pp. 231-40; ‘Préface’, in *L’univers filmique*, ed. by E. Souriau (Paris: Flammarion, 1953), pp. 5-10.

7 Gilbert Cohen-Séat, *Essai sur les principes d’une philosophie du cinéma I. Introduction générale. Notions fondamentales et vocabulaire de filmologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946), pp. 53-55.

8 See also Frank Kessler, ‘Rêve et impression de réalité’, *Revue belge du cinéma*, 42 (1997), (47-50), pp. 48-49.

9 Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, 2 vols. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1981 [1972]), II, p. 13.

10 Metz, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, pp. 90-91.

and Laffay, as well as for Mitry (whose two volumes on film theory had just been published when Metz's important first article appeared), it is indeed obvious that they combine normative statements on cinema as an art form with considerations based on, most notably, the psychology of perception, and which try to explore the specificity of the cinematic image.

The Metzian Canon of Film Theory

Whenever Metz refers in a general way to the traditions of film theory and filmology, he comes up with more or less the same list of authors: Arnheim, Balázs, Bazin, and Eisenstein on the one hand, Cohen-Séat, Laffay, and Morin on the other, with Mitry in a privileged position, as it were, because he is the one film theorist to whose work Metz has dedicated long, detailed studies, published as reviews of the two volumes of *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* in 1965 and 1967.¹¹ These authors may be considered to constitute something like the 'canon' or 'pantheon' of film theory for Metz, even though there are several others who also figure more or less prominently in his writings, such as, most notably, Marcel Martin and André Malraux. Regarding the non-francophone theorists, Metz apparently worked with the German edition of Arnheim's *Film als Kunst*, while for Balázs he generally drew upon the English translation but also referred to the German editions of *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1924) and *Der Film* (1949). Eisenstein is quoted from both the French and the English translations that were available to Metz.

There are some interesting absences in this 'canon', presumably mostly due to difficulties of access, or the fact that some theorists were simply absent from the French debates at that time. It may also have been the case, however, that Metz did not consider them relevant to his semiological approach. One of the authors whom he never mentions is Walter Benjamin, whose 'Work of Art' essay was more or less compulsory reading for German film theorists in the late 1960s and 1970s. The same goes for Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, published first in English in 1960 and translated into German in 1964. In both cases, it is evident that the importance of the Frankfurt School in the German and American intellectual landscapes respectively gave both authors' views on cinema a particular weight. Maybe more surprisingly, Hugo Münsterberg's book from 1916, *The Photoplay: A*

11 See Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, trans. by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974 [1971]), p. 10, and *Essais*, II, p. 14 and 195.

Psychological Study, which was re-edited in the US in 1970, is apparently not referenced in any of Metz's published writings. And finally, even though Metz does indeed mention him on several occasions with regard to his films, Pudovkin seems not to have interested Metz very much as a theorist, as he hardly ever actually refers to Pudovkin's *Film Technique*, which was rather widely read (at least in the US). When he discusses Soviet montage theory, Metz generally comments on Eisenstein.

In this respect, it is quite striking that Eisenstein, more often than not, appears as a negative example. Metz's essay 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?' is in large part a critique of what he calls the 'montage-or-bust' (*montage-roi*) attitude, and also of the idea of a *ciné-langue*, both attributed by Metz to Eisenstein as a theorist (while Eisenstein's status as a filmmaker is not at stake here). Obviously, the critique of the latter concept is the central point of the article, and Metz uses conceptual tools borrowed from (structuralist) linguistics to provide arguments against the idea that there could ever exist something like a *ciné-langue*. His scepticism towards the idea – or rather: ideology – of the *montage-roi* attitude, which Metz associates with a 'spirit of manipulation', tends, however, to lean towards a rather normative aesthetical position that is close to the Bazinian conception of cinema, to a certain degree at least.¹² A few years later, in *Language and Cinema*, Metz admits this in a self-critical footnote: 'In our early articles (notably 'Le cinéma: langue ou langage?' [...]), we were not wary enough of this conception (the influence of André Bazin on cinematic studies was stronger then than it is today).'¹³

So, in many of his references to them, the 'companionship' with both Eisenstein and Bazin is for Metz more or less distanced and often openly critical. While the Soviet theorist is taken to task for overemphasizing the powers of montage, Metz finds exactly the opposite flaw with Bazin; a 'fanaticism' in favour of staging in depth and non-editing.¹⁴ So when Metz reflects on the tradition of film theory, he is increasingly careful to distance himself from the normative aesthetics that usually is the foundation of the theories.¹⁵ In this respect, Metz often sides with Mitry, who generally holds a nuanced position between the extremes, even though he, too, does sometimes pronounce himself on certain questions in rather normative terms.

12 See Metz, 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?', pp. 34-44.

13 Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 103 (translation modified to match the French original).

14 Metz, *Essais*, II, p. 32

15 See also *Essais*, II, p. 28, the long footnote where he explains why a normative approach in film theory and film criticism is of little interest to him.

Yet Metz does adopt, for instance, Bazin's conception of photography as a trace,¹⁶ and in his detailed review of the second volume of Jean Mitry's *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, he patiently and approvingly reconstructs Bazin's view on the relationship between cinema and theatre,¹⁷ characterizing it as the one 'which by today has become classic'.¹⁸ This latter example also illustrates the fact that Metz's two review articles on Mitry constitute not only his most comprehensive (published) discussion of a film theorist but also his most extensive engagement with the tradition of film theory and filmology. In order to demonstrate the importance of Mitry's books – which Metz indeed considers something like a milestone and at the same time the final stage of a certain way of thinking about cinema – he sketches a vast panorama of discussions, showing how a variety of issues have been addressed by others and what kinds of answers Mitry provides to these questions. This is where Metz displays his immense knowledge of the history of film-theoretical debates that clearly underpin his own work, even though he generally does not refer in the same encyclopaedic way to all the theorists that he enumerates in these two review articles.

Revisiting the 'Impression of Reality'

Among the problems discussed by classical film theory and by filmology, and which Metz later reworked from a semiological point of view, the so-called 'impression of reality' issue is one of the earliest.¹⁹ In an article originally published in the *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1965, he draws on Rudolf Arnheim, Albert Michotte van den Berck, and Edgar Morin to explain how the perception of the cinematic image both bears a resemblance to and also differs from the way in which we perceive the world around us.²⁰ He refers to Bazin and Barthes to characterize photography as a trace of something that 'has been there' and thus addresses the specific relationship

16 Christian Metz, 'On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema', in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. by Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 3-15 (p. 8 and 14).

17 Metz, *Essais*, II, pp. 66-69.

18 *Essais*, II, p. 67.

19 Metz, 'On the impression of Reality', pp. 3-15.

20 Rudolf Arnheim, *Film als Kunst* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1932); Albert Michotte van den Berck, 'Le caractère de "réalité" des projections cinématographiques', *Revue internationale de filmologie*, 1/3-4 (1948), pp. 249-61; Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*, trans. by Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005 [1956]).

between the photographic still image and reality.²¹ He once more evokes Bazin, together with Jean Leirens, Henri Wallon, and, again, Arnheim, to discuss the specific reality that is produced on a stage.²² On the basis of the observations of these various theorists concerning the specific impressions of reality that photography, film, and theatre can produce, Metz develops his own argument, first separating then bringing together (in an almost dialectical move) two strands of thinking that appear in these discussions of the reality effect. On the one hand, Metz remarks, there are what he calls the '*indices de réalité*', these being the aspects of the real that are included in a medium's material affordances. (In photography, the fidelity of the image, to which cinema adds movement and sound, whereas theatre is characterized by three-dimensionality and physical presence.) On the other hand, there is the degree of spectatorial engagement (*participation*) with the diegesis that these different media can induce. While Arnheim²³ – whom Metz critiques on this point – sees a linear interdependence between the number of reality-indices a medium can reproduce and the resulting degree of participation (today one would probably rather use the term absorption, or maybe even immersion), Metz suggests that there is a more complicated relationship:

The truth is that there seems to be an optimal point, film, on either side of which the impression of reality produced by the fiction tends to decrease. On the one side, there is the theater, whose too real vehicle puts fiction to flight; on the other, photography and representational painting, whose means are too poor in their degree of reality to constitute and sustain a diegetic universe. [...] Between these two shoals, film sails a narrow course: It carries enough elements of reality – the literal translation of graphic contours and, mainly, the real presence of motion – to furnish us with rich and varied information about the diegetic sphere. Photography and painting cannot do this. Like both these arts, film is still composed of images, but the spectator perceives it as such and does not confuse it with a real spectacle [...] The total reality of the spectacle is greater in the theater than in motion pictures,

21 André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray, 2 vols. (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2005), I [1958], pp. 9-16; Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 32-51.

22 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, I, pp. 76-124; Jean Leirens, *Le cinéma et le temps* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1954); Henri Wallon, 'L'acte perceptif et le cinéma', *Revue internationale de filmologie*, 4/13 (1953), pp. 97-110; Arnheim, *Film als Kunst*.

23 Arnheim, *Film als Kunst*, p. 39.

but the portion of reality available to the fiction is greater in the cinema than in the theater.²⁴

The way this argument is constructed is quite typical of Metz's thinking and writing. (Those familiar with Metz's work will easily recognize from this quote, and from the brief summary preceding it, his method of circling around a phenomenon, looking at it from a variety of angles, and then carefully unpacking his observations and conclusions.) This example is also rather typical of how he appropriates, discusses, and reworks the positions formulated by classical film theory and filmology. Metz indeed reframes a problem posed by other theorists by transposing it to another level. Interestingly, in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, this article was put in a section entitled 'Phenomenological approaches to film', but Metz's argument is in fact shaped decisively by his attention to the various media's signifiers, or, more precisely, their 'material of expression', as he would call it in *Language and Cinema*. So while this article does not frontally address a semiological problem, it clearly does imply a genuine semiological viewpoint.

Reading Arnheim: The Seminars of 1982 and 1983

Within Metz's various publications, the major part of his references to such debates concerning aspects of classical film theory are to be found in the two volumes of his *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* and in *Language and Cinema*. In the *Essais sémiotiques* there are none (understandably, because cinema is not a central object of study here), and in *The Imaginary Signifier* and *L'énonciation impersonnelle* they are rare. In his last book, certain concepts such as Albert Laffay's *grand imagier* ('the Great Image-Maker') or the discussions which started in the late 1940s regarding the so-called 'first-person-film' are obviously important issues, but overall Metz refers primarily to more recent theoretical debates. So, arguably, his most intense examinations of and engagements with classical film theory and the *Ecole de filmologie* occurred during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Yet in 1982 and 1983, Metz dedicated his seminar at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes* (which was actually held at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, Censier) to a very thorough and systematic reading of Rudolf Arnheim's *Film als Kunst*. For the following I draw upon my notes, which I took throughout the seminar

24 Metz, 'On the Impression of Reality', pp. 13-14.

and which I then typed out.²⁵ This was actually the first time that I attended the seminar, and I think I owed this honour to the fact that, just before the summer break in 1981, Metz had Michel Colin ask me to buy for him, in Germany, the new edition of Arnheim's 1932 book as well as the volume of essays edited by Helmut H. Diederichs, both of which had just come out as pocket books.²⁶ It is quite interesting that Metz chose that time to return to a classic of film theory that happened to have been published exactly 50 years earlier; that is, after having had to abandon his project of publishing a volume on Freud's *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, an effort for which he had temporarily withdrawn from the realm of Cinema Studies. One of his motives certainly was to introduce Arnheim's book to an audience in France, where his work on film theory was virtually unknown (and to provide the Anglophone participants with a more elaborated version of Arnheim's theory than they could find in the selections presented in the English translation that was available at the time).

After a general introduction on the theory of perception that formed the basis of Arnheim's theory of film, Metz patiently summarized *Film als Kunst* section by section, chapter by chapter, reconstructing Arnheim's argument and commenting upon it. Partly, he positioned Arnheim in relation to theorists from the same period such as Balázs, Eisenstein, or Pudovkin. Partly he referred to subsequent theoretical debates, drawing most notably on Bazin, Cohen-Séat, Mitry, Souriau, and several others. Finally, he sometimes 'translated', as it were, the problems discussed by Arnheim into a semiological framework, showing that the issues Arnheim addressed were still valid as theoretical problems, and also at least some of Arnheim's answers continued to be relevant when they were rephrased in a different terminology.

To give one example as an illustration: Here is how Metz approached Arnheim's chapter on 'What is being filmed' (*Was gefilmt wird*), and, more particularly, the paragraph on mental processes (*Seelische Vorgänge*). Metz began his discussion of the chapter by showing that Arnheim does not operate a simple split between form and content but rather sees both as complexly locked into each other. This brought Metz to refer to Hjelmslev's quadripartite model of form and substance on the levels of both expression and content (or 'signifier' and 'signified') and to his own

25 To be precise: as this was in the pre-computer age, I had taken handwritten notes during the seminar meetings, which I later typed out on a typewriter in order to share them with Martine Joly, who was unable to attend the seminar in those two years.

26 This, too, may sound somewhat strange today, but in the early 1980s, even in a city such as Paris, it was rather difficult to get hold of foreign books, and in particular books on film theory, which booksellers generally did not consider a profitable market.

adaptation of Hjelmslev in the first section of his 1967 article 'Propositions méthodologiques pour l'analyse du film'.²⁷ Metz also evoked Eisenstein's 1925 essay on a materialist approach to film form, published in French in the *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1970 and subsequently in the first volume of the French edition of Eisenstein's collected works.²⁸ Moving on to the representation of mental processes, Metz started his discussion by recapitulating Malraux's distinction describing three ways of using dialogues in novels and films (in the prepublication of his *Outlines of a Psychology of the Cinema* in the journal *Verve*) and the relation between dialogue and narration.²⁹ According to Metz, Malraux's ideas were similar to Arnheim's discussion of gestures and facial expressions and their relation to narrative action, particularly when expressing the internal motivations of characters. In analyzing Arnheim's remarks on acting and bodily expression, Metz argued that Arnheim's account should be seen as an implicit critique of Balázs's theory of the gesture as a central element of cinema, and that Arnheim's move to privileging action over expressive gestures is ultimately not unlike the behaviourist conception of cinema that emerged in the mid-1940s.

As this brief example has tried to show, Metz apparently wanted to demonstrate that Arnheim's book could offer relevant contributions to a number of issues in film theory. In his concluding remarks at the end of the seminar, he insisted once again on what he saw as the principal merits of *Film als Kunst*. Here is a summary of his concluding comments:

- Arnheim speaks to some extent from outside the world of cinema, which makes him different from most other film theorists at that time. In that respect, his position is similar to that of the Russian formalists.
- He has wide cultural knowledge and a scientific mind, though that does not prevent his theory from being strongly normative.
- His normative attitude, however, is a broad-minded one. He was in favour of a cinema where the expressive effects (the 'effects of the signifier') are strong, autonomous, and free but always functioning to the benefit of the diegesis.
- His theory insists on the difference between the ways in which we perceive the outside world versus its image on the screen (which Metz

27 See Metz, *Essais*, II, pp. 97-100.

28 Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Au-delà des étoiles* (Paris: UGE, coll. 10/18, 1974), pp. 145-56; English as 'The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form', in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. by Richard Taylor; trans. by Richard Taylor and William Powell (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 53-59.

29 André Malraux, 'Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma', *Verve*, 2/8 (1940), pp. 69-73.

called a theory of 'factors of differentiation' [*facteurs de différenciation*]), making it an important (and anticipated) critique of the 'cosmophanic' theories that would emerge in the 1940s.³⁰

The seminar on Arnheim was, thus, something like an expedition into the history of film theory and *Film als Kunst* was positioned with regard not only to the debates of the 1920s and 1930s but also later ones, including Metz's own writings. I personally feel very privileged to have first come to know Rudolf Arnheim's theory of film through the reading of it by Christian Metz.

I do not know whether Metz had turned to Arnheim because this seminar would offer him an opportunity to delve once more into discussions of film theory and thereby to find a new topic to work on himself, some way allowing him 'to push things further'. If so, this enterprise apparently did not quite provide him with the results he had hoped for. During the two following years he discussed a variety of texts in his seminar, addressing a broad range of different issues, and there were also comparatively large numbers of guest lectures. In November 1986, however, the seminar headed in a new direction. Metz finally set out to tackle a topic on which he would continue to work for the years to come: enunciation.

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30 Again, according to my course notes.

