

CINEMA AS SIGN AND LANGUAGE

Zuzana M. Pick

Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, translated by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok, Mouton: The Hague-Paris, 1974. pp. 304

In order to evaluate and to take a critical stance in regard to Christian Metz's contribution to the theory of film, it is important to take into account the intricate and moving reality of French culture-politics. It is also essential to remember that it was mainly through the works of the French theoretical investigation, relying on theoretical premises originating in other fields. This blending of interdisciplinary methods has been a source of vitality and dynamism. Methods coming from psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy and general aesthetics permitted the understanding of the different aspects which govern the study of film as an art, as a social phenomenon and as a political object. Metz's passage from the examination of the linguistic-structural aspects of film to the psychoanalytical assumptions about film as an object of cultural consumption, indicates the complexity of the theoretical examination of this medium. If Metz's theoretical assumptions have been found to be valid by some and inappropriate by others, through his work new debates have ensued, and from these discussions, additional contributions to film theory have and will be born. No film theoretician in the last fifteen years has caused so much uproar. The controversy around Metz's writings has led to a re-examination of the basic and traditional assumptions about film. Metz's terminology, borrowed from Saussurian linguistics and Lacanian psychoanalysis, is foreign to film and to our own culture. To make the terminology simpler implies co-opting this methodology to purposes which are foreign as well. The demands made on the reader of cine-semiotics and psychoanalysis serve to activate the subject into a self-creative object. The act of de-coding the Metzian text can become a fascinating voyage into obscure regions which the film itself tries to hide. If one accepts film as a constructed object, it is not difficult to accept its theory as a constructed text to be de-codified in the same way as its object of enquiry the filmed product.

In the series "Approaches to Semiotics", Thomas A. Sebeok (Research Center for the Language Sciences, Indiana University) published in 1974 Christian Metz's *Language and Cinema*. This dense and complex book posits the principles of a film syntax by using Saussurian linguistics as a point of departure. Metz's cine-semiotics has been repeatedly attacked and defended by film theoreticians and critics. Reading *Language and Cinema* poses a number of difficulties related to the format of the book and to the material.

ZUZANA PICK

Language and Cinema was originally published as *Langue et cinéma*¹, in a series entitled "Langue et langage", a highly technical series of linguistics works. It is one of those typical "grammar-like" publications that the French favour, intended for study purposes rather than "pleasurable" academic reading. In *Language and Cinema* Metz raises the question of definition again — "cinéma: langue ou langage?" (cinema: language or language system?) — and as any grammarian will do, he leads the reader through many concepts, notions and examples, with frequent cross-references. Since he has to assume that film theoreticians are not necessarily familiar with linguistics, he proceeds to explain some of these terms in relation to their traditional usage. These explanations produce a rather ponderous style.

Metz opens his book by exposing the "rather deceptive state of research on the subject" of film theory and film language. He writes: "What one most often calls a 'theoretician of the cinema' is a sort of Renaissance man, ideally possessing an encyclopedic knowledge and a quasi-universal methodological formation" (p. 10). For Metz the film theoretician has to be a film historian, a film economist, a film aesthetician and a film semiotician - in which case he is also interested in film discourse. The person who has been able to do all this synthesis is Jean Mitry, whose *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (1963 and 1965) is the most comprehensive general theory of film. Taking his cues from Mitry's work, Metz proceeds to define the language of cinema and its specificity by applying notions of semiotics. He reiterates that the "unsystematic" qualities of film lie in the difference of cinematic language from other "spoken or written" languages. The book concludes with Metz's general statements about a possible semiotics of the cinema:

One of the goals of this book was to show that the problem of cinematic signification cannot be conveniently treated if one holds to the definition of language as a system of signs destined to be used for communication. It only really begins to take shape if one has recourse to more precise notions . . . and if it is relocated within the larger framework of present semiotic research. A cinema is not *a* system but contains several of them. It seems not to have signs . . . ; in addition, the domain of *signification* largely goes beyond that of signs. (p. 207)

Having outlined the differences between spoken language and the language of cinema, Metz then proceeds to define the elements that compose film syntax. By giving great importance to film narrative and to films of fiction, because "the cinema tells stories", he deals with syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures. The specificity of cinema, according to Metz, lies in a system of codes and subcodes that provide signification. These codes are specific

CULTURAL THEORY

(cinematic codes and subcodes like moving images, sound, music, etc.) and non-specific (codes from other “languages” which are historical, literary or cultural.) Metz sees his work as a semiotician in the analysis of signification coming from the “melange” of codes. By placing such a strong emphasis on cinematic codes, Metz neglects the notion of the image. One of the reasons for this neglect, is that he sees the image as analogous to reality. Thus the problem of “impression of reality” is still very much present in Metz’s early work, leading him to say that the “cinema is a language without signs” since the signifier and the signified are one and the same. One should refer to the work of the younger Roland Barthes for the point-of-reference from which this analysis evolves. Since Metz defines the “cinema as a language without signs” and identifies the “paradigmatic poverty” of the cinematic language, he is led to define his cine-semiotics in terms of the syntagmatic relations of various codes and subcodes.

In an earlier work — translated into English as *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*² Metz outlined the “grande syntagmatique” in an analysis of Jacques Rozier’s *Adieu Phillipine* (1961). This “grande syntagmatique” is the breakdown in narrative cinema of the organizational system of spatio-temporal logic within the area of the sequence. The syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of organization of the film text are important to Metz since it is the basis for a scientific approach to narrative cinema. By identifying the segments of the film, Metz isolates and describes the cinema’s rhetorical “writing techniques”. However, this taxonomy of denotative structures — “la grande syntagmatique” — denies the expressivity of cinematic language because it only considers the narrative codes common to all “classical films”. By favouring the syntagm over the paradigm, it denies the fact that the language of cinema is a signifying system. By attaching himself to a descriptive method whose purpose is that of examining the denotative level of cinema, Metz leaves untouched the problems of connotation, of metaphor and of symbol.

Metz’s work is thus devoted to study of cinematic codes specific to film; while the more general cine-semiotics (that of the British writers of *Screen*) is constantly involved with codes that cross a range of languages (codes of narrative, for example). In *Language and Cinema*, Metz summarizes three points of interest to semiology, three concepts that are essential to the study of film fact:

- (1) film texts which may present different degrees of material scope, the privileged one being the single and entire film (the notion of ‘film’ in its distributive sense);
- (2) textual systems, i.e. film systems which correspond to these different texts; and
- (3) non-textual film systems

ZUZANA PICK

(codes), which themselves present different degrees of generality (the distinction between codes and subcodes), and which according to the individual case may be cinematic or extra-cinematic. Those which are cinematic constitute, as a block, the 'cinematic language system'. (p. 150) The main task of the semiotics of the film fact can be summarized as follows: "to analyze film texts in order to discover either textual systems, cinematic codes or subcodes." (p. 150.)

The term "code" is used by Metz in order to define a system of possibilities, choices, or restraints, — a system bearing equally on paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. He defines code as follows:

What one calls a code is a logical entity which has been constructed in order to explicate and elucidate the functioning of paradigmatic relations in texts, and also to explicate and elucidate the functioning of syntagmatic relations in the same text. The code contains in itself the intelligibility of the syntagm as well as that of the paradigm, without itself being either a paradigm or a syntagm. (p. 162)

This type of definition allows for the following propositions, which are essential to Metz's semiological framework: (a) a series of codes organize a textual system (the film); but, (b) the textual system is not a code; (c) codes are manifest in several languages - this permits Metz to discuss intertextuality - and (d) the combination of codes might itself be understood as a code, as a "system of intercodic relations."

The difficulty in understanding Metz's approach to semiotics lies in the fact that all of his work is conceived as a "theory in progress", constantly opened to new questions, and its problematic extending itself further into different aspects of the film process. Cine-semiotics as defined by Christian Metz has to be situated within the context of the history of film theory. His earlier work is closer to Andre Bazin and the phenomenological tradition of film theory in France than it is to the formalist theories of S.M. Eisenstein. His more recent work should be linked to the psychoanalytical tradition of Freud and Jacques Lacan and the post-Saussurean semiotics of Kristeva and Derrida in France.

Theoreticians have pointed out the shortcomings of Metz's cine-semiotics and his work has been revised by himself (see below) and through other publications, like *Screen* in Great Britain. Film theory has shifted towards a different approach to semiotics. Italian and French semioticians (those of *Cahiers du Cinéma*) have examined the etiological and cultural implications

CULTURAL THEORY

of certain cinematic codes like montage, Renaissance perspective, two-dimensionality of the frame, thus questioning the "a-ideological and a-historical" Metzian framework. Yet in his recent work (e.g. *The Imaginary Signifier*) Metz has begun to examine cinema as a signifying practice, working from a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach "History/Discourse: Notes on Two Voyeurisms"³ and *The Imaginary Signifier* are Christian Metz's first psychoanalytically-related texts. Both are very personal, with Metz professing his love for the cinema and hence using a first-person address similar to Jacques Lacan's *Seminaires*.

In "History/Discourse: Notes on Two Voyeurisms" Metz starts writing:

I am at the cinema. The images of Hollywood film unfold before my eyes. One of those narrative representational films - - not necessarily made in Hollywood - - that we think of when we talk about 'going to the pictures'; the type of picture that it is the function of the film industry to produce. Not simply the film industry, but, more widely, the whole contemporary *cinematic institution*. (p. 21)

The concept of cinematic institution is Metz's most original contribution to the psychoanalytical theory of film. By introducing this notion, he emphasizes the role of the viewer, the spectator, as an essential aspect of the cinema as a signifying practice. The term "cinematic institution" should not simply be understood as the 'industry' which produces the cinema but also as "the mental machinery - another industry - which spectators 'accustomed to the cinema' have internalized historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of film."⁵ The cinematic institution comprises an "outer" machine (the cinema as an industry), an "inner" machine (the spectator's psychology), and a "third" machine (the cinematic writer - critic, historian, theoretician). In presenting this "third machine", Metz can examine his function as a writer of the cinema. His "intention to establish, maintain or re-establish the cinema (or films) in the position of good object"⁶ is linked to his love for the medium. In this context he writes:

To be a theoretician of the cinema one should ideally no longer love the cinema and yet still love it: have loved it a lot and only have detached oneself from it by taking it up again from the other end, taking it as a target for the very same scopic drive which had made one to love it.

The dryness of Metz's earliest work is replaced in his later texts with a recognition of engagement and of commitment on the part of "Metz the theoretician" as an investigator of the imaginary.

ZUZANA PICK

The cinema understood as an “imaginary signifier” has double implications for the theoretical study of film, because it applies to two basic assumptions. The cinema is a technique of the imaginary “because most films consist of fictional narratives and because all films depend even for their signifier on the primary imaginary of photography and phonography.”⁸ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the imagery is the realm of the “mirror-phase” which corresponds to a primary narcissism in which every “other” is seen as the same as the subject, and difference is not recognized. Metz situates his psychoanalytical approach in the tradition of Freud and the developments brought about by Melanie Klein in England and Jacques Lacan in France. Thus the introduction of concepts such as “pleasure”, the “symbolic” and the “imaginary”, “specularity”, “fetishism” and “voyeurism” are to be understood in relation to the approaches mentioned above. As defined by Christian Metz, the “cinematic institution” is a highly self-sufficient machine that tends to perpetuate itself, taking over the mechanisms of its own reproduction. The memory of satisfaction derived from one film becomes the projected goal in viewing another. The dominant cinema - the Hollywood narrative tradition — functions in this way. People go to see films to derive pleasure from an experience which Metz compares to the Freudian “fort/da game”. Freud’s “pleasure principle” is crucial to Metz’s *The Imaginary Signifier*. Pleasure (jouissance) is identified with a reformulation of the relation among desire, memory and the satisfaction of the need, producing perception. The subject (spectator/viewer) is constantly attempting to repeat an experienced moment of pleasure. To define this “pleasure principle” in the cinema, Metz has recourse to the “inner” (or second) machine.

The second machine, i.e. the social regulation of the spectator’s metapsychology, like the first (machine), has as its function to set up good object relations with films if at all possible: here too the ‘bad film’ is a failure of the institution: the cinema is attended out of desire, not reluctance, in the hope that film will please, not that it will displease.

Metz’s important contribution in *The Imaginary Signifier* is that he abandons the purely linguistic approach to the cinematic signifier by locating it in the act of perception. To do this, he has to clarify once and for all the “mirroring” effect of cinema. The process of identification in film is compared by Metz to the Freudian mirror-stage. Although the spectator is absent from the screen, he/she identifies the object on the screen (the images). The spectator is an “all-perceiving” subject: he/she knows that he/she is at the cinema and this knowledge is dual (but unique).

CULTURAL THEORY

I know I am perceiving something imaginary (and that is why its absurdities, even if they are extreme, do not seriously disturb me), and I know that it is I who am perceiving it. This second knowledge divides in turn: I know that I am really perceiving, that my senses are physically affected, that I am not fantasizing, that the fourth wall of the auditorium (the screen) is really different from the other three, that there is a projector facing it . . . that it is in me that it forms up into an organized sequence, that therefore I am myself the place where this really perceived imaginary accedes to the symbolic by its inauguration as the signifier of a certain type of institutionalised social activity called the 'cinema'.¹⁰

Christian Metz has not left aside phenomenology as a conceptual part of his theoretical framework. In *The Imaginary Signifier* he has redefined phenomenology in psychoanalytical terms. The subject's perception, dependent on the "perceptual cogito" as much as on the cinematic institution and the physical apparatus of film, in turn relies heavily on a period of social history and a technology. An overview of film history and the history of cinema's criticism and theory allows Metz to disclaim some of his early statements, especially those regarding the notion of "textual system" and the function of codes which he defined in *Language and Cinema*. The distinction between text and textual system is more or less discarded by Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier*. The process of signification is seen as a dynamic process in the same way as analysis is conceived as a dynamic process in psychoanalysis. A symptomatic reading of a film permits the theoretician/critic to acknowledge the banal but true observation that the form of a film tells us as much about its content as about its true meaning. Thus the study of the textual system should be an articulation of the manifest signifier (the sequences of the film) and the latent signifier anchored in the apparent data (the film script).

Raymond Bellour's use of psychoanalytical concepts in film study as in his analysis of a sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*¹¹ pre-dates Metz's above mentioned texts. Other texts by Bellour have followed, all of which have been recognized as important contributions to the psychoanalytical study of film. Bellour's articles have been recently compiled in *L'Analyse du film*.¹² Have the use of psychoanalytical concepts contributed to any further understanding of the cinema? The work of theoreticians such as Bellour, Stephen Heath and Bill Nichols have furthered the establishment of a practical methodology of film analysis by the inclusion of psychoanalysis into a structuralist framework. Its application by feminist critics and film-makers

ZUZANA PICK

such as Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston, has permitted a non-sociological approach to the problem of woman's representation in the cinema. It is in these two particular fields, textual analysis and feminist criticism, that Lacanian and psychoanalytical theory have made their strongest imprints. Lacanian psychoanalysis and its emphasis on the formation of the subject and the acquisition of language, permits Metz and the others to formulate the function of the unconscious in the signifying process triggered by the cinematic experience. The failure of semiotics and structuralism to incorporate the spectator/viewer/subject into the production of meaning accounts for this introduction of psychoanalysis to film theory.

The Imaginary Signifier with its statements and rebuttals ends typically in a "provisional conclusion". Headed by a titled paragraph "theorise", he says . . .", Metz states again his personal involvement with film theory. A psychoanalytical approach to cinema permits him to understand the "conditions of desire of whoever makes himself its theoretician. Interwoven into every analytical undertaking is the thread of self-analysis."¹³ Metz goes on, in what is a pure Lacanian position, to define the theoretical inquiry of film.

"I have loved the cinema, I no longer love it. I still love it. What I have wished to do in these pages is to keep at a distance, as in the scopic practice I have discussed, that which in me (+ in everyone) *can* love it: to retain it as *questioned*. As questioning, too, for the wish to construct the film into an object of knowledge is to extend, by a supplementary degree of sublimation, the passion for seeing that made the cinephile and the institution themselves."¹⁴

To love the cinema and to understand the cinema are two closely related aspects of the vast social and psychological machine of the cinema.

Given this conclusion, one can almost forgive Metz for boring and confusing his readers during his cine-semiotics period. Certainly one can appreciate the basic desires involved in any theoretical study of cinema, and understand the pleasure provided by film.

Department of Film
Carleton University.

Notes

1. Christian Metz, *Language et cinéma*. Paris: Larousse, 1971.

CULTURAL THEORY

2. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A semiotics of the Cinema*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
 3. Christian Metz, "History Discourse: Notes on Two Voyeurisms," in *Langue, Discourse et Société*, edited Julia Kristeva et. al., Paris: Editors du Seuil, 1975: and translated by Susan Bennett in *Edinburgh '76 Magazine*, No. 1.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
 5. Christian Metz "The Imaginary Signifier," translated by Ben Brewster, *Screen* 16, No. 2 (Summer 1975), pp. 14-76, p. 19.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
 11. Raymond Bellour *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Paris) No. 216, October 1969.
 12. Raymond Bellour *L'Analyse du film*, Paris: Editions Albatros, 1979.
 13. Metz, "Imaginary Signifier" p. 75.
 14. *Ibid.*
-