A Furious Exactitude: An Overview of Christian Metz's Film Theory

Warren Buckland

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Abstract
This first Introduction to *Conversations with Christian Metz* presents a brief and basic overview of Metz as writer and researcher, focusing on the key concepts that influenced him (especially from linguistics, semiology, and psychoanalysis), and those he generated, supplemented with some of the issues he raises in the interviews.

Keywords: Christian Metz, film theory, semiology, psychoanalysis, interviews

> Those who know Metz from the three perspectives of writer, teacher, and friend are always struck by this paradox, which is only apparent: of a radical demand for precision and clarity, yet born from a free tone, like a dreamer, and I would almost say, as if intoxicated. (Didn't Baudelaire turn H. into the source of an unheard of precision?) There reigns a furious exactitude. (Roland Barthes)[1]

From 1968 to 1991, Christian Metz (1931–1993), the pioneering and acclaimed film theorist, wrote several influential books on film theory: *Essais sur la signification au cinéma, tome 1 et 2* (volume 1 translated as *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*); *Langage et cinéma* (*Language and Cinema*); *Le signifiant imaginaire. Psychanalyse et cinéma* (*Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*); and *L'enonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* (*Impersonal Enunciation or the Place of Film*).[2] These books set the agenda of academic film theory during its formative period. Throughout universities around the world, Metz's ideas were taken up,

digested, refined, reinterpreted, criticized, and sometimes dismissed, but rarely ignored.

This volume collects and translates into English for the first time a series of little-known interviews with Christian Metz. In these interviews, Metz offers summaries, elaborations, and explanations of his sometimes complex and demanding theories. He speaks informally of the most fundamental concepts that constitute the foundations of film theory as an academic discipline (concepts from linguistics, semiology, narratology, and psychoanalysis). Within the interview format, Metz discusses in elaborate detail the process of theorizing – the formation, development, and refinement of concepts; the need to be rigorous, precise, and to delimit the boundaries of one's research; and he talks at great length about the reasons theories are misunderstood and derided (by both scholars and students). The interviewers act as inquisitive readers, who pose probing questions to Metz about his influences and motivations, and seek clarification and elaboration of his key concepts in his articles and books. Metz also reveals a series of little-known facts and curious insights, including: the contents of his unpublished manuscript on jokes (*L'Esprit et ses Mots. Essai sur le Witz*); the personal networks operative in the French intellectual community during the sixties and seventies; his relation to the filmology movement, cinephilia, and to phenomenology; his critique of 'applied' theory; the development of a semiology of experimental film; his views on Gilles Deleuze's film theory; the fundamental importance of Roland Barthes to his career; and even how many films he saw each week.

Roland Barthes mentions three ways he knew Metz: writer, teacher, and friend. Barthes characterizes Metz's disposition as a 'furious exactitude.' This was not only manifest in his writing; Maureen Turim mentions Metz's 'incredible intensity' as a teacher: "He talks for three hours, breaking only in the middle to retreat with his students to a café, '*boire un pot*', and gossip. But in the seminar itself, the lecture is given with minute precision, no pauses, no stumbling, with few notes, mostly from an articulate memory."[3] But Metz's exactitude also allowed for "a free tone," an issue he discusses with Daniel Percheron and Marc Vernet in Chapter 4 of this volume. Metz tells them that his policy in tutorials involved being "ready to speak to people (to listen to them especially), to give people space to talk about their research, to let them speak, give the freedom to choose one's topic of interest, etc. …. It is rather a 'tone', a general attitude …." Metz emphasized the need to speak to students as individuals, to express a genuine interest in their ideas, rather than simply rehearse a pre-formulated (empty) speech when responding to their research. With regard to supervising theses, Martin Lefebvre notes in a

conversation with Annie van den Oever that "[a]n almost entire generation of [French] scholars was either supervised by [Metz] or had him sit as a jury member for their doctoral defense. [...] For several years he was literally at the center of the field and therefore had a large role in shaping it." [4]

In the following pages, I present a brief and basic overview of Metz as writer and researcher, focusing on the key concepts that influenced him and those he generated, supplemented with some of the issues he raises in the interviews.[5]

Foundations: Structural Linguistics

> Cultural meanings are inherent in the symbolic orders and these meanings are independent of, and prior to, the external world, on the one hand, and human subjects, on the other. Thus the world only has an objective existence in the symbolic orders that represent it.[6]

Christian Metz's film semiology forms part of the wider structuralist movement that replaced the phenomenological tradition of philosophy prevalent in France in the 1950s and early 1960s. Phenomenology studies observable phenomena, consciousness, experience, and presence. More precisely, it privileges the infinite or myriad array of experiences of a pre-constituted world (the given) that are present in consciousness. In contrast, structuralism redefines consciousness and experience as outcomes of structures that are not, in themselves, experiential. Whereas for phenomenology meaning originates in and is fully present to consciousness, for structuralists meaning emerges from underlying structures, which necessarily infuse experience with the values, beliefs, and meanings embedded in those structures. A major premise of structuralism, and its fundamental difference from phenomenology, is its separation of the *surface level* (the infinite, conscious, lived experiences of a pre-given world) from an *underlying level* (the finite, unobservable, abstract structure, which is not pre-given and not present to consciousness). The two levels are not in opposition to one another, for structuralism establishes a hierarchy whereby the surface level, consisting of conscious experience, is dependent on the underlying level. Structuralism does not simply add an underlying level to the surface phenomenological level, it also redefines the surface level as the manifestation of the underlying level. A fundamental premise of structuralism is that underlying abstract structures underpin and constitute conscious lived experiences.

Metz's work is pioneering in terms of reconceiving film within the framework of structuralism – or, more precisely, its derivative, semiology. From a semiological perspective, film's properties cannot be studied as a conscious aesthetic experience or be defined as a sensory object. Instead, this sensory object is reconceived as a form of signification – as the manifestation of a non-observable, underlying abstract structure. To analyze film as signification therefore involves a fundamental shift in perspective, from the study of film as an object of experience in consciousness to the study of film's underlying structures, which semiologists call systems of codes.[7]

This shift in perspective is largely attributable to the foundational text of structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (first published in 1916). Saussure redefined meaning internally, by locating it within language itself, conceived as an underlying finite system, rather than in the referent or in the experiences of language users. This relocation of meaning has profound consequences for the way language (and other systems of signification) is conceived. The term 'meaning' within this theory is defined narrowly: it is synonymous with 'signification' (the signified), rather than 'reference' or 'lived experience'. Signification is an internal value generated from the structural differences between codes. This is one of the foundational principles of semiology: it replaces an external theory of meaning, which posits a direct, one-to-one causal correspondence or link between a sign and its referent, with an internal theory, in which the meaning is based on a series of differential relations within language: "In language, as in any semiological system," writes Saussure, "whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it."[8] Saussure identified two fundamental types of relation within semiological systems: syntagmatic and paradigmatic (what he called associative) relations. 'Syntagmatic' refers to the relation of signs present in a message, while 'paradigmatic' refers to signs organized into paradigms – classes of comparable signs that can be substituted for one another. Paradigms are systems of available options, or a network of potential choices, from which one sign is chosen and manifest. The sign manifest in a message is not only syntagmatically related to other signs in the message, but is also structurally related to comparable signs in the paradigm that were not chosen. Signs are therefore defined formally, from an intrinsic rather than extrinsic perspective, and holistically, as a network of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. A sign in a message does not embody one fixed meaning predetermined by its link to a referent, and cannot therefore be interpreted by itself in isolation. Instead, it gains its meaning from its structural relations to other signs.

Structural linguistics is founded upon the hierarchy between *langue/parole*, the linguistic equivalent of the structuralist hierarchy between surface and underlying level. *La parole* refers to language's phenomenological level (the conscious, experiential level of speech), whereas *la langue* refers to the underlying language system of codes. *La parole* is simply the manifestation of *la langue* and is reducible to it. Saussure described *la parole* as infinite and heterogeneous, and *la langue* as finite and homogeneous. Generating an infinity of speech utterances with finite means is possible by recognizing that all utterances are composed from the same small number of signs used recursively in different combinations. This principle – the principle of economy – is another founding assumption of semiology: all the infinite surface manifestations can be described in terms of the finite system underlying them. The structural linguist André Martinet explained this principle of economy via the concept of double articulation.[9] The first articulation involves the minimally meaningful units, which Martinet calls 'monemes'. These monemes, in turn, are composed of non-signifying significant units (phonemes), which constitute the second level of articulation. Meaning is generated from the recursive combination of the small number of phonemes to generate a large number of monemes, and then by the recursive combination of monemes to generate potentially infinite number of sentences. This is how double articulation accounts for the extraordinary economy of language, which is, according to Martinet, language's unique, defining characteristic. The meaning of monemes is generated from the structural relations between phonemes, rather than from a referent. The phonemes are autonomous from reality (they do not 'reflect' reality, but are arbitrary); meaning emerges out of non-meaning – from the selection and combination of phonemes into monemes.

These basic semiological principles – meaning is defined intrinsically, as sense rather than reference; meaning derives from syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations; the principle of economy, in which an infinite number of messages can be reduced to an underlying finite system that generated them – presents to film and cultural theorists a framework in which to study and analyze the 'symbolic order': the realm of language, discourse, and other systems of signification (literature, film, fashion, gestures, etc.). Structural linguistics and semiology oppose positivism, behaviorism, phenomenology, and existentialism, which remain on the surface, on the level of lived experience. Structural linguistics analyzes the underlying codes of verbal language, and semiology employed its methods to analyze the underlying codes of additional systems of signification.

Employing the methods of structural linguistics to analyze additional systems of signification does not entail a reduction of these other systems

to verbal language, despite Roland Barthes' reversal.[10] Although Saussure worked out his method of analysis via verbal language, he did not restrict this method to verbal language, but conceived it at the outset as a part of semiology; verbal language is just one system of signification among many. Film semiology conceives film not as a language but as a coded medium, a system of signification that possesses its own specific underlying system of codes, which can be studied using general structural methods that have been developed in structural linguistics. Metz makes this point clear in his interviews with Raymond Bellour (Chapter 3) and André Gardies (Chapter 12). He tells Bellour that: "In no case is it a matter of exporting to semiology those linguistic concepts that are linked to language [*langue*] alone." He then gives an example: "'Paradigm' and 'syntagm', such as they have been defined by Martinet, are legitimately exportable concepts […]. [They are] in no way linked to the specificity of language systems." The semiologists' study of film is therefore made, not via any direct resemblance between film and verbal language, but by studying film within the general context of signification. The question 'Is film a language?' is ill-formed and not very interesting; it is a terminological quibble. Linguistics becomes relevant *on methodological grounds*: film's specific, underlying reality can be reconstructed by a set of "legitimately exportable concepts" developed by structural linguists. At least from this methodological viewpoint, film semiologists were justified in using structural linguistics to study film, because this discipline is the most sophisticated for analyzing a medium's underlying reality, its system of signification. Therefore, David Bordwell's critique of film semiology is entirely misplaced when he writes: "Despite three decades of work in film semiotics, however, those who claim that cinema is an ensemble of 'codes' or 'discourses' have not yet provided a defense of why we should consider the film medium, let alone perception and thought, as plausibly analogous to language."[11] This mistaken view is what Metz calls (in the same interview) a reflex response, a conceptual blockage. "If a notion was emphasized by a writer who was a linguist by occupation, it is once and for all [mistakenly perceived as] 'purely linguistic', prohibited from being exported." When Metz (or his interviewees) uses the term 'film language', he uses it in the sense of 'filmic signification'.

Metz's Key Works in Film Theory

Metz's film theory contributes to the foundations of semiology as conceived by Saussure. Studying film from a structural-semiological perspective

involves a fundamental shift in thinking: rather than study film 'in general', in all its heterogeneity, Metz instead studied it from the point of view of one theory, a prerequisite for adopting a semiological perspective according to Barthes:

> To undertake this research, it is necessary frankly to accept from the beginning (and especially at the beginning) a limiting principle. [...] [I]t is decided to describe the facts which have been gathered *from one point of view only*, and consequently to keep, from the heterogeneous mass of these facts, only the features associated with this point of view, to the exclusion of any others.[12]

The researcher's focus is deliberately limited to the relevant (pertinent, essential) traits of the object under study while filtering out all other traits. What is relevant is dependent on or defined by one's theoretical perspective. Semiology focuses on the underlying system of signification while excluding the heterogeneous surface traits of phenomena. Similarly, D.N. Rodowick characterizes the rise in structuralism and semiology in the 1960s as "a stance or perspective on culture that is [...] nothing less than the imagination of a new conceptual and enunciative position in theory."[13] That new position comprises a singular unifying perspective: "theory must rally around a method, which can unify synthetically from a singular perspective the data and knowledge gathered within its domain."[14]

This new position does not analyze pre-given experiences, behavior, or facts in the manner of phenomenology, behaviorism, and positivism. Instead, as soon as the analyst moves beyond the pre-given and the self-evident, he/she must *construct* the object of study – the virtual underlying system that generates and confers intelligibility on behavior, facts, and experiences. The 'underlying reality' of systems of signification is not an empirical object simply waiting to be observed. Instead, it is an abstract object that needs to be modeled: "One reconstitutes a double of the first [original] object," writes Metz, "a double totally thinkable since it is a pure product of thought: the intelligibility of the object has become itself an object."[15] This new, virtual object of study places theory centre stage, for it is via theory that this abstract object becomes visible. And each theory constructs its abstract object differently in accordance with its own concepts. This non-empirical mode of analysis necessitates a reflexive attitude toward theoretical activity. Rodowick calls this the metatheoretical attitude: "a reflection on the components and conceptual standards of theory construction."[16] Metz not only foregrounds this metatheoretical attitude in his published research,

he discusses it extensively in the interviews published in this volume. For example, in his 1986 "Responses to *Hors Cadre* on *The Imaginary Signifier*" (Chapter 9), he dispels the notion that one simply 'applies' concepts from one domain to another:

> I have not applied anything, I have placed the cinema within more all-encompassing ideas, which fully concern the cinema just as much as they concern other objects: the general mechanisms of signification (whence the use of the term 'denotation', etc.), or of the imaginary subject, with ideas that have come from psychoanalysis but that are today, as with their predecessors, circulating far beyond their place of origin. (Metz, "Responses to *Hors Cadre* on *The Imaginary Signifier*")

In other words, he argues that he studies film within the conceptual spheres it already belongs to (including signification); it is therefore incorrect to think he applies to film concepts foreign to it.[17]

In addition to theorizing film within the parameters of one set of theoretical concepts, Metz explicitly defined his method of analysis, which he derived from Saussure. Semiological analysis names a process of segmentation and classification that dismantles all types of messages (speech, myths, kinship relations, literary texts, films, etc.) to reveal their ultimate components and rules of combination. These components and rules constitute the underlying codes that enable these messages to be produced. Metz therefore attempted to reconceive film according to the semiological principles presented above – meaning is intrinsic; it is generated from syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations; and infinite messages can be reduced to an underlying finite system that generated them. He aimed to develop a precise, delimited study of one aspect of film, its level of signification, illuminated and explained from one theoretical perspective.

New Objects and Problems of Study: 'Cinema: Language or Language System?'

In his first essay on film semiology, 'Cinema: Language or Language System?'[18] (initially published in 1964), we encounter Metz's exact, rigorous, and reflexive academic approach, one that aims to clarify his theoretical terms and problems. He asked if there is a filmic equivalent to *la langue*/language system in film. Metz's background assumption in this essay is that film must possess an equivalent to *la langue* to be defined as a language

(*langage*). Not surprisingly, the results were negative: he concluded that cinema is a language (*langage*) without a language system (*langue*). Much of his description involves documenting how the underlying reality of film does *not* resemble *la langue*. The negative results are not unexpected, for the semiological language of film does not possess the same system specific as verbal language. Metz's failure to establish the semiology of film in this essay is due to two factors: under the influence of Barthes, he analyzed film in terms of the *result* of a structural linguistic analysis of verbal language. Secondly, he was unable to define film (the filmic image) as a symbolic order independent of, and prior to, the external world. In other words, he could not locate a system of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in the filmic image. This means he was unable to analyze the potentially infinite number of filmic images in terms of a finite system of underlying codes. He could not, therefore, define the meaning of images intrinsically, but had to fall back on the pre-semiological referential theory. Despite the limited success of his results in 'Cinema: Language or Language System?,' Metz established a new object of study, new problems to address, and a new methodology with which to approach film. Francesco Casetti argues that Metz's 1964 essay "introduces a shift in the approach to the filmic phenomenon and in the kind of topics leading to this approach. A new research *paradigm* is born, as well as a new *generation* of scholars."[19] The new object of study was the unobservable, latent level of filmic signification or codes that makes filmic meaning possible and which defines its specificity. Metz explored this new level of filmic reality in subsequent work.

Identifying Film's Paradigmatic Axis: 'Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film'

In 'Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film'[20] Metz employed the semiological method of segmentation and classification to identify an internal level of signification in film, a level of meaning generated by the filmic text, not by the filmed events. He discovered a finite set of syntagmatic types – different sequences of shots identifiable by the specific way each structures the spatio-temporal relations between the filmed events. Metz detected eight different spatio-temporal relationships in total, which constitute a paradigm – a code – of different forms of image ordering. Metz called the resulting 'paradigm of syntagmas' the *grande syntagmatique* of the image track. These image syntagmas form a code to the extent that they offer eight different ways of reconstructing filmed events, which

indicates that each syntagmatic type gains its meaning in relation to the other seven types. Metz outlines all eight syntagmas and discusses the need to refine them in his interview with Raymond Bellour (Chapter 3), where he emphasizes that the syntagmatic types are primarily manifest in classical narrative cinema.

Cinematic Codes and Filmic Textual Systems: *Language and Cinema*

Metz's reconceptualization of film as a semiological object reached its zenith in *Language and Cinema*. He achieved this by introducing a series of theoretical distinctions: between cinema/the filmic/the cinematic (where 'the cinematic' designates a subset of the filmic – codes specific to film); between cinematic codes (common to all films)/cinematic sub-codes (cinematic codes common to some films); and, most importantly, between codes/singular textual systems (underlying abstract systems/the totality of filmic and cinematic codes combined in a single film). As Metz explains in more detail in the first two interviews published here, but especially in 'Cinema and Semiology: On 'Specificity'' (Chapter 2), within this more expansive study, the cinematic language system, or cinematic specificity, is defined as a *specific combination* of codes and sub-codes. Defining specificity as specific combination of codes has several implications for film semiology: (1) cinematic codes cannot be studied in complete isolation as abstract paradigmatic systems, but can only be studied from a joint syntagmatic-paradigmatic perspective: that is, in terms of a combination of codes specific to film; (2) codes are not unique to one semiological system, but belong to several systems: and (3) codes can only be studied in relation to their substance, not purely in terms of an underlying abstract formal system.

By emphasizing substance, Metz followed the work of Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, who divided language into an expression plane (the signifier) and content plane (signified), and divided each plane into material, form, and substance, yielding the six-fold distinction:

Signifier	Material (or purport) of expression
	Substance of expression
	Form of expression
Signified	Material (or purport) of content
	Substance of content
	Form of content

Material is the amorphous unformed continuum upon which form is projected, segmenting the material into distinct units. The material so organized is the substance. That is, material + form = substance. The material of expression in verbal language refers to amorphous sounds. The form of expression refers to an abstract system imposed on those amorphous sounds, which yields the substance of expression, or phonemes (structured sounds). The material of content in verbal language refers to an amorphous mass of thoughts. The form of content refers to an abstract system imposed on those thoughts, yielding the substance of content, or structured concepts.[21] Metz concedes that film semiology cannot operate only in the abstract realm of pure form – the form of expression and form of content. Instead, he emphasized the need to include the substance of expression – that is, "the action of the form in the material."[22] Metz's expanded conception of film semiology therefore challenged his previous assumptions – that specificity can be defined in terms of one code (the *grande syntagmatique*), and that specificity can be defined in terms of an abstract underlying system.

In several interviews (Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 7), Metz discusses Emilio Garroni's *Semiotica ed Estetica*.[23] Garroni thought the attempt to define filmic specificity a spurious activity. Following Hjelmslev, he divorced codes from material of expression, claiming that codes should be defined formally, in abstract terms. This, in effect, implies that codes are not tied to or manifest in the material of expression of any particular language and are not, therefore, specific to any language; a code is pure form and can therefore be manifest in the material of expression of multiple languages. Metz agrees with Garroni that a language consists of multiple codes, but disagrees that all codes are formal, not related to material of expression. For Metz, some codes are specific – are tied to film's material of expression – and some are non-specific. But Garroni rejects the attachment to the immediate material qualities of media, and instead defines a shared system of codes. That is, Metz's film semiology attempts to create a 'disembodied' abstract theory of formal codes – disembodied in terms of their separation from the material of expression; but, in the end, he defined film in terms of a specific combination of formal and manifest codes, whereas Garroni argued that all codes are formal, non-manifest, and abstract.

In their interview with Metz, Daniel Percheron and Marc Vernet (Chapter 4) interrogate Metz in depth over the difficulties of *Language and Cinema*. They express the experiences of many film scholars when confronted with Metz's excessively cautious approach in this book – his incessant return to previous positions to restate, refine, or update them; the abstract nature of his concept of the code; and the lack of any firm

enumeration of cinematic codes. Metz's response in the interview is to say that such a level of abstraction is common in other disciplines such as linguistics, and that he really needs to write a second volume, for whereas *Language and Cinema* cleared the groundwork, the second volume (never written) needs to categorize and list the various codes in detail.

Nonetheless, the enriched film semiology presented in *Language and Cinema* contributed to the transformation of three long-held theories of film: auteurism, realism, and film as narrative. The assumption behind auteurism is that meaning is located in the individual(s) in control of the production. Within semiology, the underlying system of finite codes determines meaning, not the code user; the code user does not 'express' himself or herself – does not convey some authentic experience; instead, his/her intervention simply involves selecting from a pre-existing system of codes. The code user therefore submits to the code, to its meanings and limits (or submits to the law of the signifier, in Lacan's terms). Film semiology challenged theories of realism by relocating meaning within film. The assumption behind realism is that meaning is located in film's recording capacity – in its 'direct', 'naturalistic' referential relation to reality. In *Language and Cinema*, Metz successfully challenged this assumption by relocating meaning within the filmic text itself, for he reconceived films as complex textual phenomena consisting of a specific combination of codes. Within semiology, what we traditionally call 'reality' is redefined as an effect or impression of codes, as Metz discusses in some detail in the first interview published in this volume (Chapter 1). Finally, in *Language and Cinema* Metz redefined his *grande syntagmatique* as just one contingent code manifest in films.

Psychoanalysis and Semiology: 'The Imaginary Signifier'

Metz extended his semiological analysis of film in his essay 'The Imaginary Signifier' (first published in 1975).[24] Although he appears to have abandoned semiology and replaced it with psychoanalysis, he argues in his opening part that "the psychoanalytic itinerary is *from the outset a semiological one*."[25] Later, he argues that linguistic-inspired semiology focuses on secondary processes of signification (mental activity and logical thinking), while psychoanalysis focuses on primary processes of signification (unconscious activities that Freud identified, such as condensation, displacement, symbolization, and secondary revision).[26] For Metz, psychoanalysis (especially Lacan's structural linguistic reinterpretation of Freud) addresses the same semiological problematic as linguistics, but on a deeper level, the primary

subterranean forces that drive language, film, and other symbolic systems. These forces continually modify, displace, and transform signifiers, necessitating a reconceptualization of the object of study (verbal language, film, etc.) as a process or activity, not as a static object. The symbolic order is thereby expanded to include primary as well as secondary systems of signification, and is reconceived as a dynamic system.[27]

The wellspring of subterranean primary forces that drive film is absence, the absence of referents from the space of the filmic image, and the psychological consequences of this absence. Absence generates the spectator's desire for the absent object, thereby bringing into play the role of human subjectivity, especially phenomenological accounts of conscious lived experiences, in the generation of intrinsic filmic meanings. In 'The Imaginary Signifier' and in his response to the editors of the journal *Hors Cadre* (Chapter 9), Metz attempted to reveal how the imaginary (in Lacan's sense of the term) and desire operate on the level of the filmic signifier. He argues that the function of the imaginary in the cinema is to fabricate two structurally related impressions: the impression of reality (the sense of a coherent filmic universe) and a subject position for the spectator to occupy (the impression of psychic unity).

Confining himself to the analysis of the imaginary status of the filmic signifier, Metz discovered that the image on screen and the image in the mirror have the same status – both are inherently imaginary because both offer the spectator a dense, visual representation of absent objects (the objects photographed are absent from the space of the screen and the objects reflected in the mirror are absent from the mirror's virtual space): "In order to understand the film (at all), I must perceive the photographed object as absent, its photograph as present, and the presence of this absence as signifying."[28] It is because of the filmic signifier's lack, its limitations in representing the absent events, that a theory incorporating the spectator becomes necessary to explain the production of meaning in filmic discourse, for the spectator temporarily fills in the lack. That is, the image, structured upon a lack (the absence of the filmed events), requires the spectator to fill in meaning and 'complete' the image. Here, we see Metz combining semiology with a psychoanalytically-inflected phenomenology, for the cinema's impression of reality attempts to disavowal from the consciousness of the spectator the inherent lack in the filmic signifier. This is only achieved when it transforms the spectator's consciousness – that is, displaces his/her consciousness away from the material surface of the screen and toward the fictive, imaginary elsewhere of the film's diegesis.

Beginning from the premise that the filmic signifier represents absent objects, Metz proceeded to define the spectator's position in relation to the filmic signifier in terms of voyeurism and disavowal. The conditions that constitute the pleasures associated with voyeurism are 'mirrored' in the semiological structure of the filmic signifier. The voyeur, removed from the space of his object of vision, experiences visual mastery and pleasure over that object through this secure and superior spatial position. Similarly, in the spectator's perception of the filmic signifier: the filmed events exist in a different space (and time) to the spectator; there is no reciprocal relation between spectator and filmed events, for these events are absent, represented in effigy by the filmic signifier. For Metz, the filmic signifier therefore locates the spectator in a position equivalent to the space of the voyeur, and confers upon him the same pleasures and resulting illusory, transcendental psychic unity.

Yet, Metz did not sufficiently take into account the argument that the function of the imaginary (and the impression of reality) is, primarily, to act as a defense against the 'problems' feminine sexuality poses to the masculine psyche. It is precisely when the imaginary successfully acts as a defense against feminine sexuality that it is able to constitute an illusory, transcendental *masculine* psychic unity. Any analysis of the imaginary (and the impression of reality) must therefore begin with the problematics of sexual difference and identity. But in his attempt to disengage the cinema object from the imaginary, Metz ended up constructing his own imaginary discourse, a fetish that elides questions of sexual difference (but see Chapter 7, where he directly addresses sexual difference). Analysis of the problematics of sexual difference in the cinema is the primary object of study of second-wave feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey's foundational essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' is representative of this work.[29] She shifted film feminism to the study of images as a semiological form of discourse, rather than a transparent window on to a pre-existing reality. The image was conferred its own materiality, its own signifying power. Mulvey also expanded the object of study: not just a critique of the image, but also the unconscious ideological-patriarchal nature of the cinematic apparatus – its semiological *creation* of a male gaze, of gendered (masculine) subject positions, and patriarchal (Oedipal) narrative forms that regulate desire, defining it as masculine: "Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of [male] desire."[30]

Primary Forces and Secondary Codes: 'Metaphor/Metonymy, or the Imaginary Referent'

> [In] the long piece on metaphor and metonymy, you see that [Metz is] not really interested in these terms, "metaphor" and "metonymy," *per se*. What interests him is the *deep semantic and logical structure* they stand for, a structure which is independent of their surface manifestation in rhetoric or verbal language. A deep structure that seems to manifest itself also in dreams (according to psychoanalysis) and in films. This is why his isn't an attempt to "map" linguistics or classical rhetoric *onto* film.[31]

Metz's essay on metaphor and metonymy constitutes the next stage of his constant investigation of filmic signification.[32] In this long essay, he does not so much search for local metaphors and metonymies (or other figures and tropes) in the manner of the classification schemes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but instead seeks the deep semantic and logic structure of filmic discourse. This parallels his study of film language, which was not a search for local analogies between film and verbal language, but an attempt to define the conditions of possibility of filmic signification in terms of codes and their structural relations.

In 'Metaphor/Metonymy,' Metz characterizes signification in terms of primary (unconscious) forces or pressures, rather than exclusively secondary codes and structures; or, more accurately, codes and structures are driven by unconscious forces such as desire. This task requires Metz to tread a fine line between two positions he rejects: (1) positing that the primary and secondary are separate; and (2) positing that they need to be merged. With regard to position (1), Metz does not uphold an absolute opposition between primary and secondary processes. Instead, he argues that we cannot know these primary forces in themselves, for we only encounter them once they have been represented on the secondary level. And inversely, codes and structures are not purely secondary, but are driven by primary processes. With regard to position (2), Metz develops the ideas of Jakobson and Lacan in pursuing the *parallels* between unconscious processes (condensation and displacement), linguistic processes (paradigm and syntagm) and rhetorical processes (metaphor and metonymy), without collapsing the three sets of terms into each other. In his interview with Jean Paul Simon and Marc Vernet (Chapter 6), Metz acknowledges the frustration that readers and seminar participants express when he adds complexity to his model of filmic rhetoric by refusing to collapse the three levels into each other:

> Deep down, I know very well, from the numerous discussions I have had with very diverse audiences, that what anxious readers expected was for me to say: 'On the one side, we have metaphor = paradigm = condensation = découpage, and on the other side we have metonymy = syntagm = displacement = montage'. The only thing is that this does not hold water, it is a caricature of semiology.

Here, again, we encounter Metz's exactitude in refusing to simplify the complexity of the filmic and semiological phenomena he is studying.

Filmic Reflexivity: Impersonal Enunciation

The final three interviews published in this volume (Chapters 10, 11, 12) all took place around the same time, during the seminal conference 'Christian Metz and Film Theory', held at the Cerisy Cultural Centre in 1989.[33] Several issues recur: Metz's absence from research for a number of years (the first half of the 1980s), his return to research with an essay and book on impersonal enunciation, and his homage to his teacher and mentor Roland Barthes. It is only in his interview with André Gaudreault (chapter 11) that Metz directly reveals that Barthes' death in 1980 had a profound effect upon Metz.

Before developing his theory of impersonal enunciation in the late 1980s, Metz discussed enunciation in his short essay 'Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Types of Voyeurism).'[34] The linguistic concept of enunciation refers to the activity that results in the production of utterances, or discourse. Emile Benveniste further distinguished between two types of utterance, *histoire* (story) and *discours* (discourse). For Benveniste, *discours* in natural language employs deictic words such as personal pronouns (*I, you*) that grammaticalize within the utterance particular aspects of its spatio-temporal context (such as the speaker and hearer), whereas *histoire* is a form of utterance that excludes pronouns. *Discours* and *histoire* therefore represent two different but complementary planes of utterance: *discours* is a type of utterance that displays the traces or marks of its production, its enunciation, whereas *histoire* conceal the traces of its production. In his 'Story/Discourse' essay, Metz transferred Benveniste's two forms of utterance to a psychoanalytical theory of vision. He identifies exhibitionism with *discours* and voyeurism with *histoire*. The exhibitionist knows that she is being looked at and acknowledges the look of the spectator, just as *discours* acknowledges the speaker and hearer of the utterance, whereas the object of the voyeur's gaze does not know that she is being watched. The voyeur's look is secretive,

concealed, like the marks of the speaker and hearer in *histoire*. Metz argued that classical narrative film is primarily voyeuristic, hence *histoire*, for it conceals its own discursive markers (the spectator's look).

Returning to filmic enunciation in *Impersonal Enunciation or the Place of Film*, Metz emphasized its impersonal status. That is, he acknowledged that film bears the traces of its production-enunciation, but that those traces are not analogous to personal pronouns. Instead, the traces of the process of enunciation are reflexive – they refer back to the film itself. In interview 10, Metz identifies two variants of reflexivity – reflection and commentary: "Reflection: the film mimes itself (screens within the screen, films within the film, showing the device, etc.). Commentary: the film speaks about itself, as is the case with certain 'pedagogical' voiceovers about the image […] or in non-dialogue intertitles, explicatory camera movements, etc." One consequence of defining enunciation impersonally is that it can become a general concept close to narration, a point Metz makes at length in the same interview. It is with the concept of impersonal enunciation that Metz returns to the roots of semiology and its theory of signification, where meaning is defined as an internal value generated by the film itself.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, quoted in D.N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 168.
2. Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma, tome 1et 2* (Paris: Klincksieck 1968; 1972); volume 1 translated as *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). *Langage et cinéma* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1971); *Language and Cinema*, trans. by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1974). *Le signifiant imaginaire. Psychanalyse et cinéma* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1977). *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (London: Macmillan, 1982); also published as *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982). *L'enonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck 1991); *Impersonal Enunciation or the Place of Film*, trans. by Cormac Deane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
3. Maureen Turim, 'Film Study in Paris', *Sub-Stance* 9 (1974), pp. 195–196.
4. Martin Lefebvre and Annie van den Oever, 'Revisiting Christian Metz's 'Apparatus Theory' – A Dialogue', in *Technē/Technology: Researching Cinema and Media Technologies – Their Development, Use, and Impact*, ed. by Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), p. 243.

5. This introduction draws upon my previous discussions of Metz's work: Warren Buckland, 'Film Semiotics', in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. by Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 84–104; *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Film Theory: Rational Reconstructions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); and 'Semiotics of Film', in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*, ed. by Edward Branigan and Warren Buckland (Routledge, 2014), pp. 425–429.
6. Simon Clarke, *The Foundations of Structuralism: A Critique of Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist Movement* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 2.
7. However, for an account of the influence of phenomenology on Metz's early work, see Dominique Chateau and Martin Lefebvre, 'Dance and Fetish: Phenomenology and Metz's Epistemological Shift', *October* 148 (2014), pp. 103–132. Similarly, Lefebvre presents a case for the role of aesthetics in Metz's film semiology: "I shall endeavour to show that the break with aesthetics signalled by Metz's semiology was not as thorough or absolute as it has often been made out to be." He examines the role of aesthetics via three concepts: expressiveness, stylistics, and poetics. 'Christian Metz and Aesthetics' (forthcoming).
8. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 121.
9. André Martinet, *Elements of General Linguistics*, trans. by Elisabeth Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 22–24.
10. Saussure argued that "linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system" (Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 68). For Barthes, "we must now face the possibility of inverting Saussure's declaration: linguistics is not a part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is a part of linguistics: to be precise, it is that part covering the *great signifying unities* of discourse. By this inversion, we may expect to bring to light the unity of the research at present being done in anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis and stylistics round the concept of signification" (Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith [London: Jonathan Cape, 1984], p. 79).
11. David Bordwell, 'Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory', in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p. 18.
12. Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology*, p. 154 (emphasis in the original).
13. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory*, p. 137.
14. *Ibid*., p. 167.
15. Metz, quoted in Rodowick, *Ibid.*, pp. 183–184.
16. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory*, p. 156.

17. Metz briefly takes up this issue of 'application' in his interview with Daniel Percheron and Marc Vernet, under the subheading 'You never 'apply' anything' (see Chapter 4). Raymond Bellour has commented:
    In this statement [you never apply anything], it is understood that:
    – this work is not applied in the elaboration of his own work
    – each work, therefore, implies, whether it be aware of the fact or not, the quest for its own program: it will therefore be singular, irreducible to comparison, which is what (eventually) defines it as a work;
    – Metz himself does not apply linguistics or psychoanalysis, but makes them work as reference spaces, 'programmes de vérite', historically determined, in order to elaborate his own program. (Bellour, 'Cinema and ...,' *Semiotica* 112, 1/2 [1996], p. 218).
    In his response to *Hors Cadre*, Metz is developing the third meaning of 'application'.
18. Metz, 'Cinema: Language or Language System?', in *Film Language*, pp. 31–91.
19. Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema*, trans. by Francesca Chiostri and Elizabeth Bartolini-Salimbeni, with Thomas Kelso (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), p. 91 (emphasis in the original).
20. Metz, 'Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film', *Film Language*, pp. 108–146.
21. Metz discusses Hjelmslev's six-fold distinction in *Language and Cinema*, pp. 208–212.
22. *Ibid*., p. 253.
23. Emilio Garroni, *Semiotica ed estetica. L'eterogeneità del linguaggio e il linguaggio cinematografico* (Bari: Laterza, 1968).
24. Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', *Screen* 16, 2 (1975), pp. 14–76; reprinted in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, pp. 1–87.
25. *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, p. 3; emphasis in the original.
26. *Ibid*., p. 18.
27. Metz briefly considered film as a dynamic textual system in the Conclusion to *Language and Cinema* via the concept of 'filmic writing': "writing is neither a code nor a set of codes, but a working of these codes, by means of them and against them, a work whose temporarily 'arrested' result is the text, i.e., the film" (*Language and Cinema*, p. 285). But this dynamic account of meaning remains on the secondary level of signification.
28. *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, p. 57.
29. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, 3 (1975), pp. 6–18.
30. *Ibid*., p. 17.
31. Martin Lefebvre and Annie van den Oever, 'Revisiting Christian Metz's 'Apparatus Theory' – A Dialogue', p. 255.
32. Metz, 'Metaphor/Metonymy, or The Imaginary Referent', in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, pp.149–314.

33. The conference proceedings were published under the title 'Christian Metz et la théorie du cinéma', ed. by Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, *Iris* 10 (Paris: Meridiens Klincksieck, 1990).
34. Metz, 'Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Types of Voyeurism)', in *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, pp. 89–98.