

Christian Metz and the Constellation of French Film Journals in the 1960s and 1970s

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Abstract

This second Introduction to *Conversations with Christian Metz* presents Metz's interaction with and contributions to French journals dedicated to film criticism. This introduction surveys Metz's engagement with a number of publications during the 1960s and 1970s, including *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Cinéthique*, *La Nouvelle Critique* and *Ça-Cinéma*.

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

In addition to providing new insight into Christian Metz's thinking on the cinema and its evolution over the course of nearly three decades, the interviews included in this book shed valuable light on another aspect of Metz's theoretical activity, namely, his interaction with French journals dedicated to film criticism. During the 1960s and 1970s in particular, Metz freely engaged with a number of publications, including *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Cinéthique*, *La Nouvelle Critique* and *Ça-Cinéma*. The resulting interventions take the form not only of the interviews published below, but also various articles, chapters, and letters, in addition to the personal relations Metz forged with the critics and editors who worked for these journals. Although his contributions were not entirely free of partisan considerations, Metz was never affiliated with any one journal in particular, and the theorist

adopted a broadly ecumenical approach toward organs that were otherwise renowned for their internecine, often bitter disputes with each other. Such an approach was reflected in the consideration his work was given by these same journals, which often combined admiration and critique in equal measure. Notably, the often-venomous tone that characterized these journals' polemical jousts with each other contrasts markedly with the generally respectful and amicable nature of the interviews conducted with Metz, even when differences in position were being thrashed out. This stands as a testament, above all, to the calming effect of Metz's patient, methodical temperament.

In the 'constellation' of journals that marked French film culture during this period, Metz can thus be seen as something of a shooting star: periodically making fulgurant appearances in unpredictable locations before receding once more into the darkness. Moreover, the nature of his interventions, and the reception he was given by the journals with which he interacted, were overdetermined by the broader social context of the time: as the political status quo in France was irrevocably shaken by the uprising of May 1968 and its aftermath, so too did French film culture undergo tumultuous transformations in the late 1960s and 1970s, which inevitably had profound implications for the response to Metz's ideas. Importantly, too, Metz's periodic collaboration with the major French film journals of this time had a pronounced effect on his theoretical approach toward the cinema. The more radical conclusions of *Langage et cinéma* from 1971 and, later, the adoption of a psychoanalytic framework in *The Imaginary Signifier* (1977), served to bring his work closer to the concerns of publications like *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* than his earlier more strictly semiological project. We can therefore posit a relationship of reciprocal influence between the theorist and the constellation of film criticism that surrounded him, one where they entered into a dialogue with each other, pushed and critiqued each other, and, ultimately, shaped each other's ideas about cinema.

Cahiers du Cinéma

By far the most prolonged, regular, and theoretically fertile collaboration Metz had with a film journal during this time was with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, although, strangely, he was never interviewed by the journal. Founded by André Bazin, *Cahiers* had come under the editorship of Jean-Louis Comolli by the time Metz first published with it in 1965. While later, in tandem with co-editor Jean Narboni, Comolli would steer *Cahiers* on a Marxist

course, in the mid-1960s the journal was still very much in keeping with the heritage of the *nouvelle vague* filmmakers it had helped foster in the 1950s (Jacques Rivette had only recently handed over the editor-in-chief position to his younger colleague). With this in mind, Metz's first intervention in *Cahiers* was a curious one: in February 1965, the critic Gérard Guégan had, in a review of Jean-Luc Godard's *Une femme mariée* (1964), accused Metz of ostensibly committing a 'regrettable misconception' in his recently published article 'Le cinéma. Langue ou langage?' by refusing montage and 'assimilating it with the manipulation of the real that Rossellini was so wary of.' Metz hastily issued a corrective: a letter from him, personally addressed to Guégan and published in the journal's April issue, insisted that the critic had misunderstood his text: he had only intended to condemn 'a certain form of montage (and 'film syntax') which the cinema has, in any case, already left behind,' specifying that this "*montage-roi*" consisted of "the abuse of non-diegetic metaphors, superimpositions, rapid editing, etc." While the ideas of Eisenstein, Gance and company are clearly intended as a target (as the 'Langue ou langage' article makes abundantly clear), Metz also asserts that a new form of montage had arisen in the work of Welles, Resnais and Godard, one which was no longer "a caricature of verbal structures." He concludes his missive with the statement that "only a certain form of montage is dead..."²

This exchange may not have augured a propitious relationship between Metz and the journal – the theorist bluntly states that he has "very few opinions in common with *Cahiers*."³ Nonetheless, the next month, the editors of *Cahiers* elected to publish a major article by Metz that would be of considerable importance for Comolli, Narboni and their colleagues, 'À propos de l'impression de la réalité au cinéma'. Borrowing the concept of the 'impression of reality' from Barthes' discussion of photography in his article 'Rhétorique de l'image', Metz argues that cinema has a considerably greater 'projective power' than photography (that is, the spectator has a much greater tendency to project themselves into the world depicted on the screen), owing, above all, to the movement of images, which furnishes 'a higher degree of reality [*un indice de réalité supplémentaire*], and the corporality of the objects," as well as imparting a sense of "being present [*actuel*]" in the events depicted.⁴ For Metz, the movement of images is not merely analogous to movement in real life; rather, it actually does provide the spectator with the "real presence of movement" and he defines the "secret" of the cinema as follows: "to inject the reality of motion into the unreality of the image and thus to render the world of the imagination more real than it had ever been."⁵

A year later, Metz would publish a second major article with *Cahiers*, this time on the occasion of a special issue on ‘cinema and the novel’. ‘Le cinéma moderne et la narrativité’ avows the effervescence of cinematic modernism in the 1960s – with the rise of filmmakers such as Resnais, Godard and Antonioni – but seeks to provide a corrective to the overly simplistic oppositions between classical and modern films prevalent in film criticism at the time, none of which truly satisfied the theorist. Rather than a sweeping rejection of narrative, spectacle, or drama, Metz sees the specificity of modern cinema as residing in ‘a vast and complex movement of renewal and enrichment’ of film syntax, consisting in the abandonment of certain commonplace clichés, the evolution and modification of other figures, and the invention of new, hitherto inexistent syntactic forms.⁶ Evoking the classification of his *grande syntagmatique*, then being adumbrated in articles published in other periodicals, Metz confesses that an early sequence in *Pierrot le fou* (1965), in which Anna Karina and Jean-Paul Belmondo flee Paris in their 404 convertible, conforms to none of the syntagmatic categories he had established therein. It is the bold narrative innovation in Godard’s films that leads Metz to end his article with a rhetorically florid tribute to the “man with the double-barreled first-name,” who is described on the pages of *Cahiers* as “a poet-novelist of unimpeachable narrative inventiveness, a man of a thousand tales in whom the fecundity of fabulation has those natural qualities [...] that belong to the great storytelling temperaments.”⁷ This dithyrambic conclusion, however, would be substantially tempered when, as with the earlier article on the ‘impression of reality’, ‘Le cinéma moderne et la narrativité’ was republished in Metz’s *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*.⁸

Much of ‘Le cinéma moderne et la narrativité’ consisted of a critique of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s concept of the ‘cinema of poetry’, also expounded on the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which, in Metz’s view, unsatisfactorily calques cinematic categories onto those of literary language.⁹ In opposition to Pasolini, Metz contends that modern cinema is not to be distinguished from the films of earlier eras by its possession of an inherently ‘poetic’ quality – if anything, the literary form it most closely resembles (and even here it is a loose approximation) is that of the *novel*. He nonetheless recognizes the Italian filmmaker’s analysis as offering “by far the most serious and most penetrating” attempt at defining filmic modernity, and there was much common ground in their parallel attempts to construct a semiology of the cinema. The same year as these articles were published, Pasolini and Metz, alongside Barthes, found themselves attacked by Luc Moullet, a critic for *Cahiers* and filmmaker in his own right, at a roundtable during

the Pesaro film festival. In a philippic titled 'De la nocivité du langage cinématographique, de son inutilité, ainsi que des moyens de lutter contre lui', Moullet fulminated, with his typical mordant humor and a taste for *Ubu Roi*-like provocation, against the "congenital artistic mediocrity of cinematic languages past, present and future," and argued that "there is a complete opposition between cinematic language and cinematic art, for cinematic language overwhelms art, invades it, stifles it."¹⁰

The other panelists at the session were scandalized at this caricature of their project. According to Narboni's account of the proceedings, Barthes accused Moullet of "incessantly confusing language and stereotypes" as well as pandering to "anti-intellectualism" (which Narboni himself took as an accusation of *poujadisme*).¹¹ Metz would offer a more conciliatory stance, ascribing the difference to that between theorists and artists, and arguing "Our task is not so much to say how films should be made, but to find out how they manage to be understood."¹² Shortly afterwards, Godard would issue a defense of Moullet in his text 'Trois mille heures du cinéma', describing the Pesaro pronunciamento as 'Moullet's sublime missive, Courtelinesque and Brechtian, screaming in the face of the structuralists: language, my good sir, is theft. Moullet is right. We are the children of film language. Our parents are Griffith, Hawks, Dreyer and Bazin, and Langlois, but not you, and in any case, without images and sounds, how can you speak of structures?'¹³

Toward the end of the 1960s, however, *Cahiers* would become much more closely aligned with the structuralist theory denounced by Moullet, a process that occurred in tandem with the journal's political radicalization surrounding the events of May 1968. While this shift meant that Metz would continue to be a valued interlocutor for the journal, the growing influence of Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis within *Cahiers* saw its writers develop a critique of the analytic method of Metzian semiology. In a roundtable on 'Montage' in March 1969, Narboni would broadly adhere to the argument made by Metz in 'Problèmes de dénotation dans le film de fiction' that a shot in the cinema corresponds to a sentence rather than a word (or, in Metz's famous example, the shot is equivalent to the phrase 'Here is a revolver!' rather than the word 'revolver'), but he would proceed to note that Jean-Daniel Pollet's 1965 film *Méditerranée* strives precisely to transform its constituent shots into lexical units approximating words, by diminishing the oppositions Metz had established and "effecting a perversion [...] of the actualization of the images and of their quality of assertiveness" – a process which is enabled in large part by the 'poetic' commentary to the film provided by *Tel Quel* editor Philippe Sollers.¹⁴ A

more strident critique of the analytic method of the semiologists – and proof of *Cahiers'* vexed relationship to it – came later that year. In October 1969, in the same issue in which Narboni and Comolli's landmark editorial text 'Cinéma/Idéologie/Critique' appeared, the journal published Raymond Bellour's painstaking analysis of the Bodega Bay sequence from Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). While Bellour himself, at the time closely linked to Metz, took care to avoid a hasty use of semiotic/linguistic concepts in his study, and would admit in the text's preface to the necessarily incomplete nature of any attempt at film analysis, invoking Freud's notion of '*die endliche und unendliche Analyse*' (finite and infinite analysis), Narboni saw fit to append a rejoinder to Bellour's article, which, despite acknowledging its theoretical importance, criticized his "phenomenological attempt to [...] only conceive of the invisible as being temporarily and reducibly dissimulated, or the provisionally masked reverse-side of the visible."¹⁵ To Bellour's close analysis, Narboni preferred the method of symptomatic reading drawn from Althusser's *Reading Capital*, in which "The invisible is not therefore simply what is outside the visible, the outer darkness of exclusion, but also *the inner darkness of exclusion*, inside the visible itself because defined by its structure."¹⁶

In the ensuing period, the sporadic critiques *Cahiers* would make of Metzian film semiology centered precisely on the question of ideology, or, more precisely, the lack thereof in Metz's theories. In 1971–1972, both Pascal Bonitzer and Jean-Louis Comolli would offer harsh critiques of Jean Mitry – contrasting markedly with Metz's favorable stance toward the theorist's *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* – in parallel multi-part studies published over several issues. Bonitzer's 'Réalité de la dénotation', for example, begins with a discussion of the close-up that insists on the ideological nature of the 'technical classification of shot-sizes,' which fundamentally rests, in the *Cahiers* critic's view, on a "metaphysical ordering from the part to the whole."¹⁷ In adopting the system of shot categories established by Mitry, Metz's *grande syntagmatique* thus has an explicitly empiricist foundation, which "reaffirms the illusion of the text's autonomy by privileging linearity, 'lived experience', the 'flow', that is, the diachronic level, where the denotation effects are reinforced."¹⁸ Moreover, his broader distinction between filmic denotation and connotation is similarly critiqued: denotation has the effect of "constraining the film and its reading to a transcendental semantic level that would be 'film language,'" at the same time as condemning connotation "to the role of 'artistic' supplement, expressive redundancy."¹⁹ Bonitzer is careful to clarify, however, that he is referring to arguments made in Metz's earlier works, which, he foreshadows, will

be addressed in the semiologist's "upcoming book." The "upcoming book" was to be *Langage et cinéma*, published later in the year, and the affinities between Metz's newer thinking and *Cahiers* were highlighted not only in Comolli's more favorable comments toward Metz in the third installment of his 'Technique et idéologie' series,²⁰ but also in *Cahiers*' willingness to print chapter 6 of Section XI of the book ('Cinéma et idéographie') in their March–April 1971 issue, as well as the essay 'Ponctuations et démarcations dans le film de diégèse' (included in vol. II of *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*) in their December 1971–February 1972 issue.²¹

The Dispute with *Positif*

In the same period, one of the most notorious quarrels in the history of French film criticism broke out when *Positif* published Robert Benayoun's stinging attack on *Cahiers*' new-found Marxist approach to cinema, 'Les enfants du paradigme'. The immediate pretext was *Cahiers*' support for Straub/Huillet's film *Othon*, but the *Positif* writer used the opportunity to launch into a sweeping denunciation of its rival journal, lambasting it for its supposed political tergiversations, theoretical disingenuousness, and general illegibility. In this, Benayoun unequivocally contrasted the output of *Cahiers* with the writing of Metz, who was praised for avoiding the "frivolous, autocratic and threatening attitude" of the journal, and in whose work "the semiological lexicon is natural, restrained, devoid of coquetry and fatuity."²² Benayoun would even claim that Metz's condemnation of "the fanaticism of the cinema-cinema" and his stated wish for "a junction between thinking on cinema and the general movement of ideas" are tendencies that have always been exemplified by *Positif*, again in contradistinction to the journal founded by Bazin.²³ In their January–February 1971 issue, the *Cahiers* editors responded to Benayoun's charges with vociferous opprobrium, and some degree of haughty disdain: their rejoinder to *Positif*, 'Sur quelques contresens' was presented merely as a corrective to a "calumnious campaign" and was in no way to be considered a response to an ongoing debate: "the true debate," Narboni explained, was taking place "in a field from which, in spite of its parasitic efforts, *Positif* finds itself, owing to its regressive practices, excluded."²⁴

Benayoun's broadside nonetheless earned five pages of rebuttal within *Cahiers*, a letter published in his own journal containing vague threats of legal action, and a statement titled 'Cinéma, littérature, politique' co-signed by the editors of *Cahiers*, *Cinéthique* and *Tel Quel* (the latter two journals, while engaged in their own theoretical altercations with *Cahiers*, had also

found themselves in Benayon's polemical crosshairs), which accused *Positif* of a "confusionist-reactionary discourse."²⁵ Additionally, Metz himself sent a missive to *Positif*, rejecting Benayon's imputation of a fundamental opposition between himself and the journals under attack:

It happens that I am in relations of work and discussion, more or less close depending on the case, with all those whom your collaborator assails, beginning with *Cahiers du Cinéma*. This is not to say, of course, that I agree with every single one of them on every single sentence they may pronounce. But these people and these groups are carrying out research for which, on the global level, I feel a great deal of esteem, sympathy, and a lively intellectual interest. On the subject of cinema, the most serious effort at theoretical reflection, today, is located in my opinion on the side of those whom your journal attacks. To this extent – and beyond all the complex details one would like – I feel that I am on their side far more than on the side of *Positif*, in spite of the compliments Robert Benayon addresses to me.²⁶

Metz, it seems, never had a great tenderness for *Positif*: in a footnote to the version of 'À propos de l'impression de réalité au cinéma' published in *Cahiers*, he accuses the journal of "cheerfully assumed irresponsibility" for publishing a dismissive eight-line review of Mitry's *Esthétique et psychologie* ("one of the most important books on the cinema in existence," according to Metz).²⁷ Later, in 1976, *Positif* published a harsh rebuke of Metzian film theory by Jean-François Tarnowski, in a text that, ironically, was primarily a defense of Mitry. The article was of such rebarbative vitriol – Tarnowski speaks of the "theoretical quasi-stupidity" of Metz's work, and his "incredibly impotent and strained distortion" of Mitry's ideas²⁸ – that a petition in defense of the semiologist was launched, signed by Jean Narboni and Pascal Bonitzer among others.²⁹ This support marked the end of an extensive period during which Metz's work was largely neglected by *Cahiers*: with the journal's adoption of a Maoist political outlook from 1972 onwards, less consideration was given to the purely theoretical questions that preoccupied Metz. It was not until his shift from the semiological method of his earlier work to the psychoanalytic paradigm of *The Imaginary Signifier* that something of a reconciliation with *Cahiers* was effectuated: not only did this new allegiance bring Metz closer to the thinking of *Cahiers* (and particularly the work of writers such as Pascal Bonitzer and Jean-Pierre Oudart), it also came at a moment when *Cahiers* had rejected its earlier political dogmatism and was returning to a spirit of intellectual openness.

Bonitzer's 1977 text 'Voici (La notion de plan et le sujet du cinéma)' draws significantly on Metz in discussing what he dubs the '*effet de voici*': if a close-up of a revolver, to return to Metz's example, conveys the message "here is a revolver," this "here is..." is not only an "actualization effect," as Metz argues, it is also an effect produced by the cinematic gaze, and is thus an "index of fiction" allowing the audience to grasp their own position as spectator of a film.³⁰ Metz would respond to the renewed interest in his work from *Cahiers* by publishing a segment of his 'Métaphore/Métonymie' chapter from *The Imaginary Signifier* (titled 'L'incandescence et le code') in the journal's following issue (March 1977), despite the rather tenuous connection of the passage's subject matter with film per se.³¹

Cinéthique

While Metz's association with *Cinéthique* was far briefer than his prolonged relationship with *Cahiers*, it was, in many ways, no less determinant for the theoretical outlook of the journal. Founded in 1969 by the filmmaker Marcel Hanoun, *Cinéthique* was quickly taken over by the young critics Gérard Leblanc and Jean-Paul Fargier, who closely allied themselves with *Tel Quel*. In doing so, they also appeared to outflank *Cahiers* to its left, as the more venerable journal was conducting an attempted rapprochement with the French Communist Party at this time. This political radicalism, combined with the nascent apparatus theory developed under the auspices of *Tel Quel* (with interventions by Marcellin Pleynet and Jean-Louis Baudry playing a key role in attuning the *Cinéthique* editors to the literary journal's theoretical optic), led to an almost cinephobic outlook toward filmmaking on the pages of the *Cinéthique*. With the cinematic mechanism understood as being ineluctably imbued with bourgeois ideology, Leblanc and Fargier paid little heed to film history (the work of Dziga Vertov constituting the primary exception to this rule), and their list of films meriting critical approbation was both exiguous and eclectic, with favored titles including *Méditerranée*, *Le Joueur de Quilles* (Jean-Pierre Lajournade, 1969), *Octobre à Madrid* (Marcel Hanoun, 1969) and the post-1968 output of Jean-Luc Godard.

If anything, the theoretical framework developed by *Cinéthique*, while it led to forthright polemics with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, shared with that journal an unabashedly prospective outlook, focused as much on ushering in a new form of cinema divested of 'bourgeois ideology' as it was on evaluating films that had already been made. This, perhaps, formed the key line of demarcation between *Cinéthique* and Metz's semiological project, which, in contrast, was rigorously concentrated on analyzing pre-existing works of

cinema, and had an overwhelming focus on narrative films from the classical period. Nevertheless, the interview carried out with Metz in issue no. 6 of *Cinéthique* (dated January–February 1970) – where the semiologist spoke with René Fouque, Éliane Le Grivés and Simon Luciani – was conducted in a fraternal and sympathetic manner. Differences were not disavowed, and Metz would elsewhere express skepticism toward what he dubbed ‘cinematic tel-quelism’ (see Chapter 4), but points of contact were stressed. Almost inevitably, the discussion turned toward *Méditerranée*, and, more pointedly, the possibility of spectatorial recognition in a film so formally remote from the conventions of narrative cinema. The interview concludes with *Cinéthique* stressing the distinction between “an already-made cinema” and “a cinema to be made,” a point to which Metz responds by recalling the modest scope and descriptive purpose of his *grande syntagmatique*. The interview even presents an occasion for Metz to discuss the question of the “ideological apparatus” of the cinema that was of prime importance for *Cinéthique* at the time: here, Metz affirms his agreement with the opposition between “the ideologies that are conveyed by the film and those that the film develops by dint of the very fact that it is a film.” He nonetheless confesses to being “less optimistic” than the writers at *Cinéthique*, asserting that, “it seems to me to be more difficult than you believe [...] to draw a distinction between what is ideological, within the very optical possibilities of the camera, or between what is a kind of ‘castration’ of the possibilities (a factor that certainly intervenes), and what pertains more radically to the camera itself.”³²

In the journal’s following issue (no. 7–8, dating from c. mid-1970), *Cinéthique* published a lengthy appraisal of Metzian theory by Michel Cegarra, composed in December 1969–January 1970. Although not a regular contributor to *Cinéthique*, Cegarra perhaps best encapsulates the journal’s thorny relationship with Metz in the opening lines of his article: “Metz’s endeavor appears to be both meandering and precise, hasty and effective, unfortunate and auspicious, uncertain and confident.”³³ While appreciating film semiology’s gesture of clearing the way for “a radical reading of texts/films,” Cegarra warns that it also risks remaining trapped by its own “presuppositions, pre-notions, preconceptions,”³⁴ and his ensuing study is a patiently elaborated, albeit overly schematic, overview of Metz’s key ideas.

In tandem with *Cahiers*, *Cinéthique* underwent a distinct political hardening in the years following these two texts: by 1972, the journal had adopted a more rigidly dogmatic ‘Marxist-Leninist’ position, which even entailed a spiteful rupture with its erstwhile ‘mentors’ at *Tel Quel*. Even at its most politically dogmatic, however, *Cinéthique* still felt the need to give

a detailed critical response to Metz's *Langage et cinéma* in issue no. 13 of the journal, a book that evinces traces of the impact Metz's interaction with *Cinéthique* and *Cahiers* had on his thinking. This anonymously-authored review (at this point the authorial responsibility for all texts published in *Cinéthique* was collectively assumed by the entire editorial committee) has the merit of soberly elucidating the key differences dividing *Cinéthique* and Metz, while at the same time acknowledging that *Langage et cinéma* 'combats a good number of received ideas, falsehoods [and] spontaneous, naïve notions' that 'block the development of a Marxist-Leninist practice of film and its theory.'³⁵ The critiques made of Metz are no less fundamental, however. At their core, they again come down to the descriptive/normative opposition. *Cinéthique* censures Metz for disavowing a normative element to his study,³⁶ and in striving to keep his work strictly descriptive in nature, he ends up reinforcing a "positivist ideology". Metz's concern for scientificity in fact results in an exclusion of the "science of historical materialism" from the terms of his study, and the intended political neutrality of his project is, in reality, an illusion, as it cannot avoid being positioned within "the ideological ensemble of discourses on the cinema."³⁷ By contrast, *Cinéthique* argues for the possibility of being both "scientific" and normative – it unabashedly, to use Metz's words, "explains to future filmmakers how they should go about making a film," and does so from a self-declared revolutionary perspective. Hence, whereas the question of ideological struggle is central to *Cinéthique*'s theoretical framework, the journal critiques Metz for largely avoiding this matter, and notes that the rare mentions of ideology in Metz's book are generally pejorative in nature, relating to notions such as 'stereotype', 'propaganda', and 'banality'. While Metz is careful to give a clear conceptual definition to terms such as 'film' and 'cinema', he errs, in *Cinéthique*'s view, by blithely rehashing the everyday notion of the term 'ideology' rather than utilizing the concept in the theoretical sense developed by the Marxist tradition, with the result being that "in the place of Marxist concepts, the foreground of semiological theory is massively occupied by vague psychological and sociological notions."³⁸

La Nouvelle Critique

Curiously, Metz's appearances in *La Nouvelle Critique* were almost exactly contemporaneous with those in *Cinéthique*: an interview in 1970 foreshadowing some of the main arguments of *Langage et cinéma* was followed by an in-depth review of the work in 1972. While both *Cinéthique* and *La NC* espoused a Marxist perspective on art and ideology, there was little common

ground between the two journals. *Cinématique*'s editors were grounded in *gauchiste* politics, eventually turning to a strain of Maoism that was relentlessly hostile to the French Communist Party (PCF); *La NC*, meanwhile, was one of the PCF's main cultural organs at this time. As a general cultural review, *La NC* concerned itself with literature, art, philosophy and other broader issues, but film criticism played an increasingly prominent role on its pages, particularly due to the contributions of former *Cahiers* writers Jean-André Fieschi, Bernard Eisenschitz, and Eduardo de Gregorio. Having adopted a new format in 1967, *La NC* reflected a period of cultural openness on the part of the PCF following the landmark Argenteuil central committee meeting of March 1966. More cynical minds saw the PCF's new cultural strategy as a way of circumventing the attraction of radical groups to left-leaning intellectuals in the political climate of the late 1960s. Nonetheless, the years 1969–1971 saw productive exchanges take place between *La NC* and journals such as *Cahiers* and *Tel Quel*, and the September 1970 interview with Metz took place in this context. In the 'Battle of *Othon*', for example, *La NC* joined *Cahiers* as virtually the only organs to defend Straub/Huillet's film from the derisive ridicule it received at the hands of the majority of French film critics.

This said, the question of 'ideological struggle' was a much less pressing one – on both the theoretical and political levels – for the *NC* critics than it was for their counterparts at *Cahiers* and *Cinématique*. It is notable, for instance, that, when interviewing Metz, Fieschi speaks of a "veritable dogmatic, normative peril, conceivable at the level of aesthetic tendencies [...] but unacceptable at the level of a professed scientific analysis."³⁹ Although this normative tendency is expressly linked to the ideas of Bazin by both Fieschi and Metz, the exchange foreshadows a polemic between *Cahiers*' Jean-Louis Comolli and the PCF critic Jean-Patrick Lebel on the question of cinema and ideology, which would flare up over the course of 1971. Whereas Comolli insisted on the ideological determination of the cinematic apparatus, Lebel viewed the camera as a scientific technology that was, in essence, ideologically neutral, and thus able to be used with equal efficacy by reactionary and revolutionary filmmakers alike. The debate was so acrimonious that it led to a severing of ties between *Cahiers* and *La NC*, and *Cahiers* would soon turn to denouncing the PCF-aligned journal for its ostensible "revisionism" and abandonment of a revolutionary cultural-political perspective.

By the time that Michel Marie reviewed *Langage et cinéma* for *La NC* in February 1972, the 'cinema and ideology' debate was drawing to a close, and the two journals would cease any meaningful dialogue with each other.

Marie – who would later become a key figure in French film studies, and, indeed, an interviewer of Metz for *Iris* in 1989 (see Chapter 10) – is generally laudatory of Metz's book, hailing it as “marking a turning point in reflection on the cinema,” but he concludes his piece with two key criticisms of Metz, which are worth outlining in some detail. Firstly, Marie argues that Metz is overly insistent on the notion of cinema as a ‘*langage d'art*’, and this factor, as well as an overestimation of the role of the individual creator (the auteur director) in the elaboration of film language, leads Metz, in Marie's view, to conflate film language with narrative cinema, thereby neglecting other social uses of the cinema, such as the development of scientific films in the GDR. Although Marie notes that Metz is self-critical of his prior work on this point, he judges that the semiologist has “not completely disembarassed himself of this ‘Bazinian heritage’ (*mise en scène* as an activity of arrangement and reorganization proceeding directly from ‘reality’).”⁴⁰ Secondly, and more crucially, Marie takes issue with Metz's definition of film language as “a first, purely denotative level where the code of analogy and recognition intervene + a second level consisting of artistic connotations as a supplement,” and he rejects the idea of an “anteriority of the denotative level,” even if Metz explicitly declares this anteriority to be a fiction constructed for the sake of analysis.⁴¹ Despite the tense relations between *La NC* and *Cahiers*, to defend his perspective Marie invokes Bonitzer's repudiation of Metz in “*Réalité de la Dénotation*”, discussed above, and echoes Jean Louis Schefer's warning that the semiological project risks reducing the status of the image to that of a mere text. In the end, however, rather than a clear-cut antithesis, Marie prefers to see the writings of Bonitzer, Oudart, Schefer and Francastel on scenographic representation as providing a complement to the semiology of Metz, Umberto Eco and Emilio Garroni, with the *NC* writer concluding that “all theoretical reflection on the cinema today must interrogate the analogical status of the image and the very notion of representation.”⁴²

Ça-Cinéma

Our final star in the constellation is a journal of a rather different ilk to *Cahiers*, *Cinéthique* and *La Nouvelle Critique*. Whereas these three organs were monthly magazines intended, at least in theory, for a wide readership, and blending theoretical texts with reviewing and other critical activities, *Ça-Cinéma* sought to explicitly position itself as being closer to an elite literary review, following the model of publications such as *Tel Quel* or *Les Temps Modernes*, but with a specific focus on film theory. Founded by François Barat and Joël Farges in July 1973 and published by Éditions

Albatros, *Ça-Cinéma* appeared on a quarterly basis, with issues generally containing a small number of long, often theoretically dense articles. A premium was placed on drawing prominent writers: the first issue notably contained texts by Marguérite Duras, Philippe Sollers and Jorge-Luis Borges. The rarefied literary register of the journal, meanwhile, was established by Farges' initial editorial, which stated: 'The anaphoric trajectory (connotation) of the (cleaved) subject is to multiply (by homological locks) the markers of a specific problematic (in the movement of Film practice), to shift across inventories (films, paintings, writing, etc.), the pluralism of systems and, *on the basis of practice*, reveal the constraints that ligate the Film.'⁴³

That film semiology would be at the core of *Ça-Cinéma*'s theoretical endeavor was also evinced in the journal's inaugural issue, which published a French translation of Emilio Garroni's article 'Sémiotique des messages artistiques'.⁴⁴ It was the May 1975 issue, however, that solidified the journal's link with Metz, with the publication of a 176-page double issue dedicated entirely to the semiologist's work, edited by his pupil Marc Vernet, and featuring, in addition to the interview reprinted in this volume (Chapter 4), texts on Metz by figures such as Roland Barthes, Stephen Heath, Jean Louis Schefer, Felix Guattari, Raymond Bellour, Thierry Kuntzel, and Michel Marie. Vernet described the goal of the dossier as being "to sketch what film semiology is today" at a time when "this domain is in the process of changing orientation, with Metz, alongside other semiologists, departing somewhat from the linguistic approach in order to integrate a psychoanalytic approach into their method."⁴⁵ For Vernet, "the current face of semiology is a plural one" and the fact that the discipline was at a methodological crossroads was demonstrated, above all, by the inverse theoretical trajectories of Metz and Guattari: while the former had turned toward psychoanalysis, the latter was "tackling the reading of Hjelmslev proposed in *Langage et cinéma*."⁴⁶ The conversation with Metz, meanwhile, was one of the most comprehensive and thoroughgoing interviews he gave during this period (in this its main rival is the dialogue that Metz and Bellour conducted for *Semiotica*, also republished here [Chapter 3]).

Vernet would subsequently become a permanent member of the journal's editorial board, and under his auspices a pair of issues dedicated to psychoanalysis and the cinema were published in 1978–1979: once more, Metz was a privileged interlocutor, with the journal's format again allowing for an in-depth exchange on Metz's theories (see Chapter 6). That *Ça-Cinéma* was experiencing troubles during this time, however, was indicated by the same issue's editorial, in which Vernet lamented the sporadic, ad hoc nature of previous numbers (which made consolidating a regular readership

difficult) and announced a restructuring of the quarterly to “allow us to clearly re-situate the journal and the work that it will produce in its field: film analysis.”⁴⁷ The results of this revamp were mixed, however, and the journal ceased publication in 1980. While *Ça-Cinéma* had a relatively brief, intermittent existence, a number of its editors went on to be involved with the bilingual film theory journal *Iris* in the 1980s, and its texts stand today as valuable documents of an incomparably fertile, albeit turbulent, period for reflection on the cinema in France. To a significant degree, such a state of affairs was a legacy of the groundbreaking theoretical work carried out by Christian Metz during this time.

Notes

1. Gérard Guégan, ‘Décollages’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 163 (February 1965), pp. 81–82.
2. Christian Metz, ‘Godard et le montage’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 165 (April 1965), p. 5.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Metz, ‘À propos de l'impression de la réalité au cinéma’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 166–167 (May–June 1965), pp. 76, 79. Translated as ‘On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema’ in *idem, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 7–8.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 82 (p 15).
6. Metz, ‘Le cinéma moderne et la narrativité’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 185 (December 1966), pp. 43–68.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
8. See Metz, ‘Le cinéma moderne et la narrativité’, in *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2013 [1968]), pp. 177–211. Translated as ‘The Modern Cinema and Narrativity’, in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 185–227.
9. See Pier Paolo Pasolini, ‘Le cinéma de poésie’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 171 (October 1965), pp. 55–64, translated as ‘The Cinema of Poetry’ in *Cahiers du Cinéma in English* 6 (December 1966), 34–43; and ‘Le scénario comme structure tendant vers une autre structure’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 185 (December 1966), pp. 77–82.
10. Luc Moullet, ‘De la nocivité du langage cinématographique, ainsi que des moyens de lutter contre lui’, in Moullet, *Piges choisies (de Griffith à Ellroy)* (Paris: Capricci, 2009), pp. 235, 236–237. Long a mythical text, known only from second-hand accounts, ‘De la nocivité’ found its first publication in 2009 in an anthology of Moullet’s critical writings. The same collection gave Moullet’s more recent views on theoretical activity: “I wrote a few theoretical texts. Not too many. It’s dangerous. Metz, Deleuze, Benjamin and

- Debord all committed suicide. Maybe they discovered that theory gets you nowhere, and the shock was too much (not to mention Althusser)." *Ibid.*, p. 234.
11. Jean Narboni 'Notre alpin quotidien', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 180, pp. 58–60, here p. 60.
 12. *Ibid.* For more on the Pesaro dispute, see Marc Cerisuelo, 'Tu n'as rien vu (à Pesaro)', *CinémAction* 52 (June 1989), pp. 192–198.
 13. Jean-Luc Godard, 'Trois mille heures du cinéma', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 184 (November 1966), p. 48. Translated as 'Three Thousand Hours of Cinema' in *Cahiers du Cinéma in English*, 10 (May 1967).
 14. Jean Narboni, Sylvie Pierre and Jacques Rivette, 'Montage', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 210 (March 1969), p. 24. Translated as 'Montage', in Nick Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, volume 3: 1969–1972 The Politics of Representation* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 28.
 15. Narboni, 'À-propos', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 216 (October 1969), p. 39.
 16. Louis Althusser et al., *Lire le capital* (Paris: PUF, 1996 [1965]), pp. 20–21. Translated as *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 27. Cited in Narboni, 'À-propos', p. 39.
 17. Pascal Bonitzer, 'Réalité de la dénotation', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 229 (May 1971), p. 39. Translated as 'Reality of Denotation', in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, volume 3: 1969–1972 The Politics of Representation* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 248–253.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. Jean-Louis Comolli, 'Technique et idéologie (4). Caméra, perspective, profondeur de champ', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 233 (November 1971), p. 40. For an English version of this text, see Jean-Louis Comolli, *Cinema against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology Revisited*, trans. Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 210–211. In this passage, Comolli foreshadows a planned, deeper analysis of Metz's ideas in a later installment of 'Technique et idéologie', but this never materialized.
 21. Metz, 'Cinéma et idéographie', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 228 (March–April 1971), pp. 6–11; and 'Ponctuations et démarcations dans le film de diégèse', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 234–235 (December 1971, January–February 1972), pp. 63–78.
 22. Robert Benayoun, 'Les enfants du paradigme', *Positif* 122 (December 1970), p. 11.
 23. *Ibid.* The quotes are taken from Metz's interview with *La Nouvelle Critique* in September 1970, see Chapter 2 below.
 24. Narboni, 'Sur quelques contresens', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 226–227 (January–February 1971), p. 116.
 25. 'Cinéma, littérature, politique', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 226–227, p. 115. Signed Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean-Paul Fargier, Gérard Leblanc, Jean Narboni, Marcelin Pleyne and Philippe Sollers (Paris, 21 December, 1970). Translated as 'Cahiers du Cinéma: Cinema, Literature, Politics' in Browne (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, volume 3: 1969–1972 The Politics of Representation* (London: BFI, 1990), p. 187.

26. 'Une lettre de Christian Metz' (9 January 1971), *Cahiers du Cinéma* 226–227 (January–February 1971), p. 121.
27. Metz, 'À propos de l'impression de la réalité au cinéma', p. 82. The footnote does not appear in the version of the text published in *Essais sur la signification du cinéma*, or in the existing English translation.
28. Jean-François Tarnowski, 'De quelques points de théorie du cinéma (à propos d'une lettre de Jean Mitry)', *Positif* 188 (December 1978), p. 48.
29. For details of the affair seen from a point of view sympathetic to Tarnowski, see Nicolas Bonci, 'Jean-François Tarnowski. La théorie des dominants', <http://louvreuse.net/dossier/jean-francois-tarnowski.html> [accessed 27 June 2017].
30. Bonitzer, 'Voici (La notion de plan et le sujet du cinéma)', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 273 (January–February 1977), p. 18. Translated as "Here: The Notion of the Shot and the Subject of Cinema" in *Film Reader 4* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1979), p. 119.
31. Metz, 'L'incandescence et le code', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 274 (March 1977), pp. 5–22.
32. See Chapter 1 below.
33. Michel Cegarra, 'Cinéma et sémiologie', *Cinéthique* 7–8 (undated, c. mid-1970), p. 26. Translated as 'Cinema and Semiology' in *Screen* 14:1–2 (1973), p. 130.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Anon., 'Sur 'Langage et cinéma', *Cinéthique* no. 13 (2nd trimester, 1972), p. 27. Translated as 'Cinéthique on *Langage et cinéma*' in *Screen* 14:1–2 (1973), p. 189.
36. Metz does this explicitly on pp. 65–66 of *Langage et cinéma* (Paris: Larousse, 1971), where he states: "Film semiology has sometimes been accused of wishing to establish normative rules, destined to explain to future filmmakers how they should go about making a film! Let us simply recall that the most fundamental method of semiological analysis is situated precisely to the contrary of such an intention."
37. Anon., 'Sur 'langage et cinéma', p. 28.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
39. See Chapter 2 below.
40. Michel Marie, 'Langage et cinéma. Sur un ouvrage de Christian Metz', *La Nouvelle Critique* 50 (February 1972), p. 81
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
43. Joël Farges, 'Éditorial', *Ça-Cinéma* 1 (July 1973), p. 1.
44. Emilio Garroni, 'Sémiotique des messages artistiques', *Ça-Cinéma* 1 (July 1973), pp. 54–62.
45. Marc Vernet, 'Introduction', *Ça-Cinéma* 7–8 (May 1975), p. 3.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Vernet, 'Éditorial', *Ça-Cinéma* 16 (undated, c. 1979), p. 2.

