

### 3. Interview on Film Semiology

*Raymond Bellour and Christian Metz*

Buckland, Warren and Daniel Fairfax (eds), *Conversations with Christian Metz: Selected Interviews on Film Theory (1970–1991)*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

DOI: 10.5117/9789089648259/CH3

#### Abstract

In this wide-ranging interview, carried out by Raymond Bellour for the journal *Semiotica* in 1971, Christian Metz outlines the progression of his film semiology from his earliest essays in 1964 to his book *Langage et cinéma* (1971). He discusses his *grande syntagmatique*, the notion of code, and introduces the distinction between ‘film analysis’ and ‘film semiology’.

**Keywords:** Christian Metz, film theory, film semiology, film analysis

‘Entretien sur la Sémiologie du Cinéma,’ Raymond Bellour et Christian Metz. *Semiotica*, 4, 1 (1971), pp. 1-30. Reprinted by permission of Walter De Gruyter Publishers. Translated by Daniel Fairfax.

*Raymond Bellour:* Can we consider your *Essais sur la Signification au Cinéma* (Paris, Klincksieck 1968) as the first book of film semiology?

*Christian Metz:* On a level that I would call ‘official’, we could indeed, and it has been done. Nonetheless, in my opinion, this is not the first book where we can find reflections of this nature. We must not forget the various contributions of the Russian formalists, in particular the collective anthology *Poetika Kino* (*Film Poetics*), on which Shklovsky, Tynianov and Eichenbaum collaborated. Additionally, in a more diffuse, scattered manner, there are certain passages in the writings of the best film critics and/or theorists: Eisenstein, obviously, but also Arnheim, Balázs, Bazin, Laffay, Mitry; and, in another perspective, Cohen-Séat and Morin. These authors (and others I have

not thought of at present) posed with a reasonable degree of precision various problems of *signification* – it would thus be absurd to flatly ignore them under the pretext that they did not officially brandish the ‘semiological’ label.

What we can say, simply, is that my 1968 book is the first work on film that explicitly and systematically draws on the concepts and methods of modern linguistic theory.

In sum, I wanted to *get to the bottom of the ‘film language’ metaphor*, to try to see what it hid, and in view of this goal to mobilize in a sustained yet ‘compact’ manner the experience of those who have best studied language – that is, linguists.

*Bellour*: The text introducing the second section of your book, its true core, expresses this very precisely. (Let us recall that these *Essais*, various contributions that perfectly complement one another, are ordered in four sections:

1. “Phenomenological Approaches to the Cinema”
2. “Problems of Film Semiology”
3. “The Syntagmatic Analysis of the Image Track”
4. “The ‘Modern’ Cinema: Some Theoretical Problems.”)

This decisive, relatively polemical text poses by its very title (“The Cinema: Language or Language System?”) the question that is of necessity located at the origin of the semiological project.

*Metz*: In effect, Lévi-Strauss says in *Structural Anthropology*, with regards to rites and different ethnological systems, that we can and must pose, for every system of signification (I won’t say ‘system of signs’, because the notion of the sign, narrower than that of signification, is much less central to semiology today than it was in the past), a fundamental question which is something like this: to what extent is it actually a language [*langage*]? The only system that is thoroughly made to signify is language in the strict sense of the term (= phonic, or ‘articulated’ language). As for all the others (those that semiology studies), there intervenes a prejudicial question that is well formulated by Lévi-Strauss. This question is both prejudicial and contradictory, because in order to respond to it we must, in a sense, have already covered the fields of knowledge that it allows us to define: we must have already *saturated* what it *opens*.

*Bellour*: How did this question come to be uttered in the cinematic field?

*Metz*: Its formulation is based on an astonishment, which explains why the 1964 text (“Cinema: Language or Language System?”) can appear so

polemical. My astonishment was at seeing numerous works dedicated to 'film language' that totally dispensed with the findings of linguistic research, but that nonetheless insistently affirmed the idea that the cinema is a language, or a language system. What's more, it has often occurred (even in Eisenstein) that these last two terms are employed as if they were synonymous.

I wanted to uncouple these two terms, as is apparent in the very title of the 1964 article. My starting point here was the Saussurian notion of *language system* (which would no longer be the case today, at least not in the same manner), or more precisely the Saussurian trichotomy 'language system/speech/language', which defines language as a vast ensemble of phenomena in which are grouped the language system (a very well-organized system) on the one hand, and various speech acts on the other hand. It seemed to me that the cinema could be compared to a language, but not to a language system: one does not find, in the cinema, a highly integrated set of fixed structures, which defines a language system, but one does find recurrent assemblages, more or less codified schemas, 'patterns' of all kinds, which evoke the phenomena of partial codification proper to 'speech', or rather to what we now call discourse, in the sense that Benveniste, for example, understands this term. (I have become, in the meantime, quite skeptical about the notion of 'speech', at least once it is conceived as a sort of unorganized residue; 'speech', in reality, is a set of sub-codes.)

In traditional literature on film, one of the most widespread ideas is that the cinema is a language because images are organized within the sequence like words are organized within a sentence. Now, not only are these two modes of assemblage entirely different (as both structural linguistics and transformational generative linguistics show), but furthermore the shot is in no way assimilable to a word, and nor is the sequence assimilable to a sentence. If you must seek out assimilations, it would be less false to liken the shot itself with, if not the sentence, then at least a discursive segment on the level of the *utterance* [*énoncé*].

This allows, I feel, for a sort of morality: very often, excessive linguistic assimilations do not involve *too much* dependency on linguistics, but *too little*.

A little linguistics leaves one disoriented, but a little more leaves one enlightened. There are two sides to this remark. It is polemical, because among the reproaches of unwarranted linguisticity that have been made against me (as is the case with many semiologists), there are some that I categorically deny. But it is also self-critical: my own reflections on the relations between linguistics and film analysis (and notably in the article

we are speaking about) had not been sufficiently thought through. Since then, I have been hard at work, and there still remains much work to do.

Nonetheless, I persist in believing that the majority of traditional considerations on film language rested on a type of widespread misunderstanding of logical successivity. In the first stage the cinema is declared to be a language. In the second stage it is studied like a language system. In the third stage (if I can put it like that), linguistics is ignored, even though it is the study of language systems and their relationship to language.

The semiological enterprise, at the beginning, appeared to me to have two sides. The first, the negative side, involves clarifying what the cinema is not (we thereby proceed by difference with what we know about language systems, which have the advantage of being better known). The second, positive side, theoretically following on from the first (even if, in the mind of the researcher, they ceaselessly depend on each other in a bidirectional dynamic), must study what the cinema is. Linguistics, then, remains useful for its methods, to the extent that it transcends itself in moving towards a general semiology. It thus serves a twofold function in the study of the cinema, but not in the same way, and it is not exactly the same linguistics.

*Bellour:* This negative, critical phase indeed appears totally decisive, and I believe that the weight of the equivocations linked to the history of film art and film theory largely explains the acute terminological rigor of your book. You bring to an end a movement whose two extremes are simultaneously incomparable and comparable: one, that of Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein, where the excessive reference to language is inscribed in the purely creative, futurist perspective of the cinema as the language of revolution, an admirable utopia with scientific lyricism destined to interpret reality through the methodological prism of historical materialism; the other, that of all those film 'grammars', which are essentially reductive and passé, insofar as, operating *a posteriori* a wild assimilation with the structures of phonic language and, through them, the expressivity of literary forms, it denies the art of cinema any specificity. (Let us note that while the former programmatically target the being of the cinema, in reality they instruct us about the structures and the genesis of their own films; the latter meanwhile, speaking naïvely in the name of all films, are logically led back to only ever being able to utter erroneous propositions on any given film.)

I think it is particularly important that the terms that until now have been almost taboo – *shot* and *sequence* – appear, at the conclusion of this negative operation, to lose value, any stable reference, whether this be an extrinsic one, with respect to the language system, or an intrinsic one,

insofar as the raising of any trace of phonic language breaks them up and redistributes them according to a specific code, analogically determined by the linguistic model, and whose positioning [*mise en place*] constitutes the truly positive aspect of your work.

In all this, it seems to me that film semiology has only been able to provoke a series of oppositions, to the extent that it also confronts head-on an idealist tradition that, far from wishing to recognize a language system [*langue*] in the cinema, denies it even the possibility of being considered a language [*langage*].

*Metz*: It does indeed challenge the validity of a dual trend: on the one hand, a metaphysics of the *visible*, which constitutes the cinema, on the basis of its photographic precision, as an authentic double of reality, maintaining it in some way *beneath* language; on the other hand, a confused and spontaneous ideology of pure creativity, which initially propels cinema *beyond* language.

For me, film semiology seems to offer, among other things, the possibility of overcoming this double pitfall, by considering, on the one hand, that the film assembles various spectacles in a different way to what they were or would be in a-filmic perception (known as 'reality') – and that it is thus an act of language, and on the other hand, that filmic productivity is only intelligible on the basis of a set of pre-existing codes, even if their combination (or, sometimes, their destruction) remains a fully 'creative' act.

I would add that the resistance of the resolute defenders of the citadel of iconicity (and visibility) – those who accuse semiology of utilizing linguistic notions to tackle a non-linguistic object (this last point, by the way, is not even true since the advent of talking cinema) – finds its analogue in the resistance of linguistic purism, which aims to critique all exportation of linguistic notions outside its own field. These two forms of resistance, which come from entirely different horizons, nonetheless manifest a kind of objective complicity, because they both communally rest on the idea of 'undue extrapolation', thus risking an abandonment of the study of cinema in favor of the generalizations of the worst of traditional aesthetics.

Personally, I find that there is a lot to say on the very notion of 'undue extrapolation'. Linguistics offers us two distinct types of concepts that the semiologist must untangle from each other. It is evident that a notion such as that of the *phoneme*, for instance, does not concern all signifying systems; nor is the question of claiming to locate phonemes within the film image (here I am thinking of certain reproaches that [Pierre] Francastel has addressed to semiology, and which seem to me to be ill-founded – all the more so given that his own work, in my opinion, is authentically semiological

in nature, setting aside all debates on labels). In no case is it a matter of exporting to semiology those linguistic concepts that are linked to language [*langue*] alone. But in the work of linguists, we also find a series of notions that are of great interest to general semiology.

*Bellour*: In the sense that, for Saussure, linguistics was only a privileged sector of general semiology.

*Metz*: Exactly. And this according to two different modalities (but which both lead to the same result): either, in certain cases, linguists, when defining a term, situate it initially in the explicit perspective of general semiology, thus forbidding the very idea of a '*borrowing* from linguistics' (see the 'sign' in Saussure, 'form/substance/ matter' and 'content/expression' in Hjelmslev, etc.); or, alternatively, such and such a notion was posed by linguists who did not especially think of semiology, but was defined in a movement and an acceptance which were sufficiently ample that they enabled the notion to be rightfully applied to codes other than phonic language systems. 'Paradigm' and 'syntagm', such as they have been defined by Martinet, are legitimately exportable concepts, because the fact that units may be co-present in a text, or that, inversely (if we can put it like that), they may be 'co-absent' – a unit of the text being commutable with another one which is not in the text – is in no way linked to the specificity of language systems. The syntagmatic fact and the paradigmatic fact do not number among those that separate language systems from other codes, but which connect them. There is therefore no unjustified borrowing (and, at bottom, no borrowing at all): we simply draw from general semiology's arsenal of notions, which happens to have been constituted, to a significant extent, by linguists, but which has been equally elaborated by logicians, psychoanalysts, specialists in informatics, etc.

Nevertheless, there remains, among many people, a kind of reflex, a genuine blockage. If a notion has been emphasized by a writer who was a linguist by occupation, it is once and for all 'purely linguistic', prohibited from being exported. The only thing that counts is the profession of the father.

*Bellour*: How, in your view, has semiological description in the strict sense, on the basis of this prior operation of destruction-definition, been concretized?

*Metz*: I chose to study closely a cinematic code, which I called the code of the *grande syntagmatique*. It is one cinematic code among many others. Today,

I am fully aware of this – but when I was carrying out this research things were much less clear in my mind: I was studying *one* code of the cinema, but without brushing aside from the margins of my consciousness the vague impression that it was possibly *the* code of the cinema (the vacillation is noticeable in my book).

In any case, my starting point was the notion of the ‘sequence’, which is endowed with a strong degree of sociological existence, as much in the practice of filmmakers as it is in the perception of spectators. It seemed to me that this vague term ‘sequence’ in fact covered several distinct modes of combining images, that these different modes entered into opposition with each other, were organized in a code, and that they were finite in number in a given synchronic state of film language (even if a later evolution of the language-object can modify this code, just like any other code). I have clarified the very notion of the sequence with the linguistic concept of the *syntagma*, because a sequence, by definition, is an alignment of several successive images co-present in the text (= the film). As for the differences separating the various types of sequence from each other, I gave them the name *paradigms*. By substituting them for each other, I strove to take stock of the various types of sequence that are distinguishable in the image-track of narrative films from the classical era (= three limitations, therefore, in order to reach an object that could even come close to being mastered). I thus arrived at a paradigm with eight types, or rather twelve types, as the first type contains five sub-types.

This is the example of a code which is at once, and indistinctly, ‘grammatical’ and ‘rhetorical’. Grammatical, because it assures the most literal intelligibility of the visual narrative (it is a code of denotation, although, on top of this, it strongly connotes). Rhetorical, because it concerns syntagmatic elements of major dimensions (= ‘sequences’, precisely), and because it is thus tied to the composition of the film and its narrative organization (it is a code of *dispositio*, in the technical sense that this word had in classical rhetoric). Of course, there are other codes that organize, in the film, the play of elements of a smaller syntagmatic dimension (the relation of motifs within a single shot, etc.); but as we advance towards the ‘smaller’ elements, we encounter a problem that, for me (even today) remains open: among the codes intervening on this level, which ones are specifically cinematic, and which ones are integrated into the filmed spectacle? In the latter case, we are dealing with what is commonly called, in discussions of cinema, ‘reality’, that is to say, in fact, a set of perceptive, iconographic and symbolic structures which pre-exist the intervention of the camera, which is content to *relay*, under the cover of analogical recording (the notions



of 'representation' and 'iconicity' used by the American semioticians, or Charles Sanders Peirce's 'likeness') – something which does not preclude superimposing its specific codes on them.

To return to the larger segments (sequential types), I was struck by the lack of distinction, in the domain of film studies, between grammar and rhetoric. Under various forms, this idea was also expressed by others (recently, for example, by Pasolini and Mitry). Connotation can be extracted from the very form of denotation; by choosing between several denotative structures, a connotative signifier can also be established. Maybe the language system (the phonic language system) is the only code in which we can isolate a 'pure' grammar logically separable (even by abstraction) from all rhetoric, even if this is only because of the existence of *several* idioms? Obviously we should leave aside, in this discussion, those codes which, at least ideally, have no connotation whatsoever (mathematical languages, logical languages, etc.). But it is too early to draw conclusions on such a vast and complex problem.

*Bellour*: Can you briefly recall the eight types of this '*grande syntagmatique*'?

*Metz*: I initially make a distinction between the *autonomous shot* (type no. 1) and the seven other types. The autonomous shot is a single shot equivalent to a 'sequence' (= an entire episode of the film treated in a single shot); the seven other types (including types 2 and 8) are sequences in the proper sense of the word: each one has several shots and thus rests on 'film editing' in the narrower sense of the term (splicing shots together [*collure*]).

The autonomous shot includes, on the one hand, the 'sequence-shot', well known by film analysts and frequently studied since Bazin, and on the other hand what I have called 'inserts': single shots which owe their autonomy to their status of syntagmatic *interpolation* in the filmic chain, and which are not on the same level of reality as contiguous images (a typical example: the non-diegetic metaphor, which presents an object external to the action of the film and only having a 'comparative' value). I have distinguished four kinds of inserts, the definitions of which would take us too long to recall here.

Within the 'autonomous syntagmas' (= 2 to 8), the a-chronological syntagmas (2 and 3) are opposed to the chronological syntagmas (4 to 8). In the a-chronological syntagmas, the filmic discourse deliberately abstains from clarifying what, in the storyline, is the chronological relationship between the different images of the same 'sequence' (= a momentary, voluntary defection of the signified from temporal denotation). Here we find the *parallel syntagma* (type no. 2), better known under the name of



'parallel montage': several recurrent motifs are interwoven together, to directly symbolic ends, without any knowledge of their temporal relation in the action of the film. There is also the *bracket syntagma* (type no. 3): a succession of brief evocations that the film does not 'date' with respect to one another, but which it gives as samples of an identical order of realities (by way of example: the initial erotic evocations in Jean-Luc Godard's *Une femme mariée* [1964]).

In the chronological syntagmas (4 to 8), the film explains the literal temporality – and not only the symbolic or 'profound' temporality – that links the images of a sequence to each other. The *descriptive syntagma* (type no. 4) represents the only case where this temporality consists exclusively in simultaneities. (It is a matter here, of course, of the temporality of the signified; on the level of the signifier, every 'sequence', whatever it is, consists of the unfolding of a succession of events.)

Opposed to the descriptive syntagma are the various narrative syntagmas (5 to 8), in which the temporal relations between shots – which are still relations of the signified – can be categorized as consecutive. When a single 'sequence' presents, in alternation, several (most frequently, two) distinct events consecutively, we are dealing with the *alternate syntagma* (type no. 5), often called 'cross-cutting' [*montage alterné*]. For example, a shot of the pursuers, then a shot of the pursued, then a shot of the pursuers, etc. Between the different images of each series of events, the relation is consecutive. Between the two series taken *en bloc*, the relation is simultaneous.

Distinguished from the alternate syntagma are linear narrative syntagmas (6 to 8), 'sequences' dedicated to a single consecutive action. In the case of the *scene properly speaking* (type no. 6), the chronological limits of the single consecutiveness of the signifier (= what unfolds on the screen) and the single consecutiveness of the signified (= the temporality of the fiction) coincide: the scene 'lasts in real time', even though it results from the editing of several separate shots (= there can be spatial hiatuses, but not temporal hiatuses).

On the contrary, these temporal hiatuses – moments that 'jump', and that can be perceived to do so – characterize the sequences properly speaking (types 7 and 8): single but discontinuous consecutive actions (it is in this sense that, among the eight types, only they truly merit the name of sequence). In the *episodic sequence* (type no. 7), discontinuity is erected into a principle of construction and intelligibility, the segment is built around its ellipses: each image resumes a 'phase' or a 'stage' of a long, monodirectional evolution, and is separated from the preceding and following images by a major gap. For example, the famous sequence from *Citizen Kane* (Orson

Welles, 1941) where we see, in a sort of short-cut, the affectionate relations of the hero and his first wife progressively deteriorate before our eyes. On the contrary, the *ordinary sequence* (type no. 8), which is very frequently employed in films, is content to dispose of its ellipses in a dispersed order, in order to 'skip' those moments that it intends to skip, and thus without conferring a short-cut value to the others.

There you have it. I have tried to summarize, in order to respond to your question, the general tableau of my '*grande syntagmatique*', such as I conceived of it in 1968 (see text no. 5 of my *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* [chapter 5 of *Film Language*]). But I fear that I have been both too brief and too long-winded...

*Bellour*: What is the domain of applicability for this code, to the extent that you have us understand that it responds to a given synchronic state of film language, which you designate, in this case, by the term 'classical narrative cinema'?

*Metz*: It seems to me that the *grande syntagmatique* translates the effort the cinema has made to return to the classical 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. The eight types of sequences are charged with expressing different kinds of spatio-temporal relations between successive images within an episode, so that the film can have a clear and univocal storyline, and the spectator can always tell if image no. 3, on the level of the diegesis (the signified) 'takes place' before image no. 2, or after it, or at the same time, etc. Historically, the validity of this code overlaps with what I would call the 'classical' cinema: since the stabilization of the sound film (in the early 1930s), up to the first manifestations of what is known as 'modern' cinema, which can be approximately situated, in France, to around 1955 (= the first short films of the *nouvelle vague*). Obviously, many films made after 1955 have remained very classical in the way they are made and do not witness any effort at innovation, at least on the level of what is considered here; to this extent, the grid that I have just summarized can be applied to them.

There are also *generic* limitations. This code only applies to narrative cinema (= fiction films), and so it excludes – unless the grid is specifically rearranged on the basis of a new *corpus* – pedagogical cinema and a certain category of documentary films.

As for 'modern' films, their goal, and/or their effect, is precisely to enrich, modify, loosen and diversify (and sometimes even to destroy or corrupt) this *grande syntagmatique*. This amounts to saying that the structures are situated in history, and that in the cinema (as elsewhere) there is diachrony.

It is not an essential aspect of the cinema to have eight types of sequences (supposing that there even are eight of them, that is, supposing that I have not committed an error of formalization). This character is attached to given films in a given period.

*Bellour:* I suppose that the establishment of this code is the result of an inquiry that is all the more empirical given that you are the first to have considered the cinema entirely from this angle.

*Metz:* Certainly. We cannot even conceive that an empirical inquiry, even if it is restrained to a defined period and genre (which would already comprise thousands of films), manages to unconditionally establish that there are not, in such and such a film, sequences unable to be categorized in one of the eight types. We cannot view every film sequence by sequence. The table of the *grande syntagmatique* has been obtained, inevitably, in a rather intuitive manner: successively viewing numerous films of this genre and this period led me to progressively add more types of sequences until the moment when, having arrived at eight of them, I could not find a ninth. In semiology, this is what is known as the saturation of the corpus, when examining the text no longer reveals a new structural figure, but only new occurrences of figures already located.

Here we touch on the problem known as *discovery procedures*. In linguistics itself, the most recent theories judge that they do not exist. This is *a fortiori* the case in semiology, where we are groping around much more.

*Bellour:* It seems that the constitution of the *grande syntagmatique* comes up against an obstacle that you underline in a long footnote, which applies to the very high degree of complication that the first type in your table offers. You reach a point where you express the idea that it might be necessary to create *two* syntagmatic tables of the image-track. What do you mean by this?

*Metz:* There is indeed a complication in the autonomous shot, and above all in the 'sequence-shot' which is one of its sub-types (I will not mention the other sub-types, such as inserts). The era that my *grande syntagmatique* covers is principally characterized by what Bazin called 'classical *découpage*': an analytic *découpage* which, in order to apprehend a complex segment of the action, prefers to fragment it into several successive shots rather than film it in continuity. We then find ourselves, by definition, in one of the seven other types of my classification (= autonomous segments formed of several shots). But before and after this classical period, filmmakers have been more

willing, in their practice, to allow the inclusion of much longer and more complex elements of the storyline in a single shot. This often happened in Feuillade's films, for example, and it often happens, to varying degrees, in 'modern' cinema, which Bazin correctly defined, in a rather symbolic manner, by the appearance of the sequence-shot. But these periodizations overlap each other – and are intertwined with one another – in such a way that the films I have dealt with offered me both sequence-shots (type no. 1) and syntagmas (types 2 to 8). This coexistence is particularly striking in the work of Orson Welles, for example.

The sequence shot, a particularly long and complex variety of the autonomous shot, gives rise to an internal construction ('internal montage', as it is sometimes called), which plays on the duration of the continuous take (see the famous gluttony episode in Welles' *Magnificent Ambersons* [1942]), the axial staging of the motifs (= the problem of depth of field; see the episode of the pianist in *The Best Years of Our Lives* [1946] by William Wyler), their lateral staging (= the width of the field; see the crossed paths of the characters in *La Règle du Jeu* [1939] by Renoir), characters entering and leaving the frame, etc. In short, it plays on a whole range of spatio-temporal relations, but which the filmic discourse operates inside a single shot, without recourse to cutting [*collure*].

What also strikes me is that in the sequence shot we can find, at least up to a certain point, various spatio-temporal schemas that equally appear in the types that I have numbered 2 to 8. A given logical connection which, in these latter cases, is operated by montage in the narrow sense can also be achieved within a sequence shot, by means of camera movements. Here we have an idea that was clearly formulated by Jean Mitry: montage in the broader sense (= the general activity of syntagmatic assemblage) is a more expansive notion than mere 'editing' [*collage*]. It can be a *description*, in a film. So it can be carried out in several shots (shot 1: the stream; shot 2: an adjacent tree; etc.) – in which case it is a 'descriptive syntagma' (type no. 4). But it can also be brought about in a single shot – the passage of visual details being here the result of a pan. Now, the logical schema is the same in both cases: the consecutiveness of signifying elements = a simultaneity of corresponding signifieds (this is the very definition of the term 'description').

In this sense, the methodological task would consist in pinpointing which of my syntagmas (of types 2 to 8) are susceptible to having equivalents within the sequence shot. Not all of them are. It is obvious, for example, that the bracket syntagma or the episodic sequence could not be realized in a single shot.

We thus arrive at a second table in the *grande syntagmatique*, which would more specifically concern 'internal' montage. In comparison to the syntagmatic table, its homology would be partial and lacunary in nature. As for the *grande syntagmatique* itself, it finds itself split into two, in a way. Our present type no. 1 would no longer be placed on the same axis as the seven other types.

Nonetheless, I left it in there – for the meantime. Why? Because the sequence shot (as its name indicates, by the way) is commutable with a true sequence, and represents, in comparison with the entire film, a subdivision of the same rank. Certain linguists estimate that, in order to get to the bottom of the phonological system of a particular language system [*langue*], it is more economical to establish two distinct sub-systems, one for vowels and one for consonants. All the same, in language systems such as French, a consonant can commute with a vowel, and this substitution may suffice to differentiate two morphemes whose phonematic tenor is otherwise identical. These problems, as you can see, only have a methodological resemblance with my own. But this counts, and it has helped me to glimpse – but only glimpse, at least at the present moment – the possibility of dividing my typology of 'classical' sequences into two.

*Bellour*: It is certain that the mere constitution of a second table allows us to incorporate, without an excessive degree of schematism, a film like *Rope* [1948] for example, which Hitchcock, as if he were intentionally laying a trap for the semiologist, insisted on filming in a single shot (or in eight shots, if you want to take account of the pans to black determined by the length of film contained in the camera's magazines) but where we can find, within this codic displacement, all the laws of assemblage specific to his other films, which are constructed on an extreme fragmentation of the shot. (Hitchcock rightly states: "The camera movements and the movements of the actors exactly reconstituted my usual way of cutting, that is to say, I maintained the principle of the proportion of images with respect to the emotional importance of a given moment.")

It seems to me that this double table also presents the advantage of being able to alleviate a certain arbitrary periodization. I was actually quite struck by the fact that, by approximately delineating the classical cinema to the years between around 1933 (the stabilization of sound film) and 1955 (the appearance of 'modern' cinema), you naturally cited the most remarkable examples of sequence shots in films like *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Rules of the Game*, which date from the 1940s. It is as if the classical cinema lost its unified nature as soon as it had found it, and as if your diversified

code was capable of marking, more than the overly simplistic division between periods, the levels that make them intermesh with one another, hence allowing us to re-establish, with the rigor of formalization, the concrete motion and pluralism of a historical process.

*Metz:* Your second hypothesis corresponds to the attitude I have adopted towards my own work. In the book we are speaking about [*Essais sur la Signification au Cinema/Film Language*], a large number of copious footnotes demonstrate my dissatisfactions and the problems that remain unresolved (= the notions of 'alternating syntagma', 'frequentative variant of a syntagma', etc.). I think there remains much work to be done.

Conversely, I criticize my classification, in its current state, for placing on the same level types that I would call *hard* and other types that seem *soft* to my mind. Hence, the bracket syntagma or the non-diegetic insert are very distinct, particular configurations that can be easily recognized without error. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the ordinary sequence or scene has rather indistinct contours. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish them from a shapeless mass, isolate them from the general filmic flux.

In my opinion, there is no need to hide the fact that film semiology as a discipline is still in its infancy (this does not, however, prevent it from having made considerable progress in comparison to traditional reflections on film language). We are starting off from zero (or almost zero). This is why I feel – including in the affectivity of my work – a considerable disproportion between the breadth of my efforts and the degree of certainty for the results attained up to now. This is a result of the *situation* – in both scientific and historical terms. I think we have to accept this, and keep going forward nonetheless.

*Bellour:* You said you were tempted, when you started your research, to consider the *grande syntagmatique* of the image-track as *the* code of the cinema, whereas it appears to you now as merely one code among others. This pluralization of codes presents a field of essential questions that you have not truly addressed in your book.

*Metz:* In fact, this problem of the plurality of codes was not ripe in my mind at the moment when I wrote this book. It happens that the first code I studied is that to which I gave the name *grande syntagmatique* (it is also the only one which, for the moment, I have studied in a truly detailed fashion). This is the source of a certain wavering that is inscribed in the book itself: in some passages, I explicitly state that it is one code among others, but

elsewhere I let it be understood that, even if it is not exactly the cinema's only code, it could at least be its most important code.

Today, the pluralist hypothesis strikes me as the only one that gives us a chance of mastering a film's semiological material. At the beginnings of semiological research, it is difficult to escape a sort of common representation that seeks to recognize *a language code* – aligning languages such as 'film language', 'musical language', verbal language', etc. with each other in a relationship of uniform exteriority (in the logical sense of the term). In fact, this is to confuse language with code.

The same year as my *Essais*, Emilio Garroni published a book on film semiology, *Semiotica ed Estetica* (Bari, Laterza 1968), which helped me a lot to reflect on this point in a self-critical perspective. This book established, with great clarity, the distinction between 'language' and 'code', which is not very well formulated in my *Essais*, but occupies a central place in my current thinking, and notably in the book that I am in the process of completing [*Language and Cinema*]. It seems to me that we can give the name 'language' to a unity that defines itself in terms of its *material of expression* (a Hjelmslevian notion), or the 'typical sign' as Barthes puts it in *Elements of Semiology*. Literary language is the set of messages whose material of expression is writing (primarily physical writing); film language is the set of messages that are identical in their material of expression, which is fivefold: moving photographic images, recorded phonetic sound, recorded noises, recorded musical sound, and writing (intertitles, credit sequences, etc.). Hence 'language' is a technico-sensorial unity, immediately discernible in perceptive experience, and consequently in the usual social classifications: 'cinema', 'painting', 'gesture', etc.

Conversely, a code is a purely logical and relational set that only the analyst may construct, and which is not based on material but on *form*, in the sense understood by Hjelmselv (= form of content + form of expression). A code is a field of commutability, signifying differences. Thus, there can be several codes in a single language, and inversely a single code can manifest itself in several different languages (see Garroni's book).

Garroni, by the way, goes further than me in this line of thinking. He adjudges that only languages are specific, and that codes are not: what is specific to the cinema is the combination of several codes, and this alone. And so each one of the codes can be found in other languages, and does not have specific links to the cinema.

I do not think it is necessary to go this far: I explained my views on this matter in an article ('Spécificité des codes et spécificité des langages,' *Semiotica* 1: 4 [1969], 370-396), which constitutes something of a reply to



Garroni, and which will be further developed in my next book *Langage et cinéma* (Larousse, 1971). Certainly, it is clear that many codes *that appear in films* are not *specifically cinematographic codes*: a film carries along with it collective representations, ideologies, forms borrowed from other arts, cultural symbolisms of all kinds. But the cinema equally forges its own codes, for the cinema is an apparatus (a machine), and it is also a technique (the way the machine is used). There exist many figures – which are made of forms, and not pure matter – that the cinema alone is capable of realizing: dissolves, panning shots etc. (this list is longer and more complex than this).

*Bellour*: In this way, you have strictly redefined the ambiguous notion of cinematic specificity, by establishing a theoretical split between the material basis of the film and the codes that nonetheless structure it, as if to mark that this codification is, more than the effect of an ontological pre-determination, the fruit of a historical process and a cultural logic which lead to the film – as a means of mechanical reproduction – being the site *par excellence* of a fictive language.

In this sense, the specific object of film semiology would be – by means of a second, much more radical split between the codes themselves – the logical description of the set of codes that you recognize as being specifically cinematic.

*Metz*: This is indeed the object of *film semiology*. But it is not the object of the *structural analysis of films*. The latter is the singular structure of each film taken as a totality: we must therefore take into account all the codes that appear in the film under study, whether or not they are specific to the cinema. There are, it seems to me, two fundamental approaches, which are related, complementary, but nonetheless distinct, as they do not obey the same principle of pertinence. You can follow a single code across several texts, or you can analyze a single text in all its codes. The first approach is the study of codes (a code always appears in several texts), while the second is the study of texts (a text always includes several codes).

If I study the *grande syntagmatique* of which we have just spoken, I learn nothing concerning any of the particular films in which it nonetheless imprints its form – this is a study of the code. Inversely, those who analyze a given film must locate all the codes active in it, without the proper object of their efforts being any one of these codes, but only their unique combination in a *textual system*. This combination is the very movement of the text (its advancement, its concrete displacement), which is constructed on the basis of these codes, but equally against these codes. For it is a property of the

textual system – inasmuch as it affirms itself through the text as the sole pertinent system – to actively push back into irrelevance the different codes on which (= against which) it constructs its development.

*Bellour:* Do you think, even if the proposition can appear a little utopian, that semiology, to the extent that it seeks to be descriptive, can and must proceed to an exhaustive inventory of those codes that are specifically cinematic?

*Metz:* We can already carry out a similar project: highlighting specific elements, linking them with one another, beginning to organize them in codes and sub-codes (for example: depending on the period, individual film and genre, there are different systems of opposition between the fade-to-black and the dissolve). Certain figures seem to me to be incontestably specific, as they are linked *as forms* to the material of expression by which the cinema is defined.

Nonetheless, I do not believe that film semiology, even if it were more advanced, could establish a closed and exhaustive list of specifically cinematic codes. There is, in fact, a fundamental to-and-fro movement between the code and the text: the text is constructed on pre-existing codes, but it still leaves behind the elements of new codes or new sub-codes. The list of codes could therefore only be exhaustive if films were no longer being made.

*Bellour:* I understand your reservation inasmuch as semiology always intervenes after the creator, the code after the text. But is it not contradictory if you take a distinct historical field as your object? Must we invoke, in this case, the impossibility of an experimental verification of the corpus, always susceptible to offering new elements to the activity of codification, or is it more the case that exhaustiveness cannot, in and of itself, enter into the program of semiology?

*Metz:* We can always – we must always – strive to be exhaustive with respect to the partial task that we fix for ourselves at each stage of our work. But absolute exhaustiveness (and here, I willingly adopt your own terms) does not, I feel, enter into the program of semiology. It cannot, and it must not. For, even if films were no longer made (and even if the semiologist was thus presented with a closed text), nothing could *achieve closure* – which is, by the way, real on a smaller scale (when, for instance, the complete output of a dead filmmaker is studied). When applied more generally to the historical evolution of film, which is the history of analysts just as much as it is the history of ‘creators’, the principle of infinity is not only on the side of new

modes of writing [*écritures*], but also on the side of new modes of reading [*lectures*]. Film semiology would evolve even if the cinema stopped evolving.

*Bellour*: I would now like to ask you a few rather discontinuous questions, which are implied, in my opinion, by this series of statements on the status of the *grande syntagmatique*, the plurality of cinematic codes, the relations of structural analysis and semiological description. Can you, first of all, pinpoint some of the other codes which seem to support the very notion of cinematic specificity?

*Metz*: There is, for example, the code which is traditionally designated by the name 'filmic punctuation' (fades, wipes, irises, swish-pans, etc.), with its different sub-codes corresponding mainly to particular periods. From one sub-code to the other, the total list of optical effects used varies considerably, and the system according to which they are opposed to each other varies even more dramatically.

There are camera movements: tracking shots, pans, crane movements, handheld cameras (in 'direct' cinema, for example), optical tracking shots (the zoom, the Pan Cinor). Here again, the code overlaps with numerous sub-codes: the forward tracking shot on the face of the hero thus functions, at a certain point in time (cf. *Brief Encounter* [1945] by David Lean) as the signal for an imminent passage to 'interiority': it was used to introduce so-called 'subjective' flashbacks, in which the evocation of the past is not directly assumed by the subject of the filmic enunciation, but ascribed to a character remembering the events.

There is also a code (or set of codes) that is particularly important for organizing the relations of speech and what can be seen on the screen. This is an enormous problem, which goes well beyond the famous discussions in the 1930s on the 'off-screen voice' and 'a-synchronism' (Pudovkin, Balázs, Arnheim, René Clair, etc.). I am thinking of the *large segments* of filmic speech: sentences, sentence fragments, sometimes just words – and of the manner in which they are articulated with the image-track. For in its smallest segments (phonemes), speech – even filmic speech – has nothing cinematic about it: it simply refers to the language system in question.

Moreover, there are all the editing codes (or at least those editing codes which are truly specific to the cinema), all the types of relations between music and images (the experiments by Eisenstein and Prokofiev), etc.

*Bellour*: Thus when you say, with respect to the descriptive filmic segments, that two distinct shots or one single shot including a pan are

strictly equivalent as far as the act of description is concerned, I suppose that – independently of any stylistic connotation – the difference between the two constructions must be marked semiologically by the mediation of a second code: the code pertaining to camera movements.

*Metz:* Yes, absolutely. Here there is an interference between two codes, that of the *grande syntagmatique* and that of camera movements.

*Bellour:* On the issue of description, let us return to one matter in particular. The fourth syntagma that you have identified is the 'descriptive syntagma', opposed to the category of 'narrative syntagmas' (divided into 'alternating syntagma' and 'linear syntagmas') within the category of 'chronological syntagmas'. Let us take an extremely frequent example, particularly striking illustrations of which can be seen in the Western. A man on horseback moves forward and discovers, at a bend in the road, a ranch that the Indians have ravaged and set ablaze. He approaches, framed initially in front of the incinerated house with his back to the camera, then frontally, alone, in a mid-shot. There then follow three shots: the first, static, shows a smashed fence, the second, equally static, a broken window, and then, in the courtyard, a tracking shot progressively reveals a body with an arrow poking out of it. Finally, to cap off this 'moment' (what immediate perception calls a sequence), a forward camera movement with a slight pan frames the departure of the horseman.

These three central shots cannot truly said to be 'subjective', since nothing explicitly denotes (for example, through an alternation between seeing subject/seen object) that these are the visions of the character, but everything lets us understand that this is the case, through the ambiguity that the cinema shows so often in the interplay of looks.

These three shots, therefore, in your codification, would be noted as a descriptive syntagma, as opposed to the narrative syntagma, which is represented by the first and last shots of the horseman. Is there not something contradictory here, inasmuch as the very discovery (successive, syntagmatic) of the different shots must – as much as it can be seen as a description in the strict sense operated by the filmmaker (although even this notion should itself be interrogated) – be understood as the progressive discovery of the character (even if, I repeat, it is not directly subjective), and in this sense, as rightfully inscribing itself in the narrative process?

*Metz:* My attempt at a *grande syntagmatique* was carried out on a very *narrow* principle of pertinence, which deliberately leaves many things to one

side. This is where your objection is right. I have exclusively taken account of the diegesis, and not the *points of view* from which it is apprehended. In the case you cite, I would indeed code it as a 'descriptive syntagma'. And yet, it is true, as you say, that this description is in a sense a narration, the narration of the perceptions of the character. But on the level of diegesis, it is impossible to say that the body is 'after' or 'before' the window; rather, it is *to one side*. In this respect, the difference between narration and description remains total, depending on whether the elements that are successive in the signifying chain are equally successive in the chain of signifieds (= narration), or whether, on the contrary, they are simultaneous and spatially coexistent (= description).

Your objection still stands. But what exactly is its status? It seems to me that its aptness does not authorize saying that my descriptive syntagma would, at the same time, be a narrative syntagma – or at least, that the classificatory axis on which it is descriptive should not be confused with the axis on which it is narrative. The point of view is temporalized, but the diegesis is not. I believe that we have two distinct codes here: the *grande syntagmatique* on the one hand, and on the other hand the code of the points of view and looks, which you yourself have superbly analyzed (I am thinking of your study of Melanie's looks in 84 shots of *The Birds* by Hitchcock').

*Bellour*: How do you envisage, on an entirely different level, the possibility of a codification of the soundtrack? In this respect I was struck by a seminar that attempted to describe Jacques Rozier's short film *Blue Jeans* [1958]: this presentation had the courageous, but somewhat imprudent, goal of applying your typology not only to the image, but also to the entirety of the narrative process, thus tearing apart both the autonomy and the intertwining of the different levels, as well as the particular difficulty of logically analyzing sound elements.

*Metz*: These are very complex problems indeed, but we should have a stab at them. Simply put, I do not believe that we can use my classification to do so, since it is entirely conceived for the image track. Analyzing the soundtrack is a different task, and should be conducted as such (of course, although this is only a minor point, we can ask ourselves which of my image assemblages have sonic equivalents, and which ones do not).

In any case, it does not seem to me that the filmic chain divides into two (a visual chain and an audio chain). Rather, it divides into four: images, speech, music, noise (in addition to which there are, intermittently, written texts). Either we study each of these four series separately, or we try to

apprehend filmic discourse as a whole, that is, we try to directly locate the mixed assemblages (image-speech, speech-music, etc.). The notion of the 'soundtrack', which covers three of the four series, is particularly uncomfortable and problematic in the current state of research. It is already a composite ensemble, while still being partial.

*Bellour:* The very notion of sub-code, to which you often make reference, seems on the one hand to respond to a historical breakdown, at the same time as sanctioning other limits, whether in terms of genres (in the strict sense, like the Western, for example, or the musical comedy) or in terms of nations, schools or tendencies. Does this not, in your opinion, imply the idea of a partial overlapping, at the two extremes, between semiological description and structural analysis, with the former becoming more restricted to delimiting the circumscribed forms of language, and the latter widening its field, from single films to broader cultural combinations?

*Metz:* Yes and no. Yes, for the reasons you have mentioned. No, because the overlapping you talk about only concerns the dimensions and the surface of the corpus (the respective principles of pertinence continuing to remain distinct). It is true that we can study a given sub-code specific to the classical Western, and that we can also study the classical Western as a vast continuous text, going beyond inter-filmic boundaries. In both cases, the corpus would be the same: the sum total of classical Westerns (or at least a representative sample of this genre). But the study would not be the same. In the first case, each of the films of the 'group' would be examined separately, and we would only retain from it the traits that are realized by the sub-code under study: through the very proposition of the research, the group would see its unity shattered, in twofold fashion: firstly, by the fundamentally *enumerative* approach presiding over the grouping process (an approach implying that the films of the group only form a group from a very particular point of view, and for the mere sake of a very small number of their traits), and subsequently because *each of the films* of the group which, in the same movement, sees its unity dismantled (the codically pertinent traits being taken into consideration, by abstracting them from the rest of the film). In sum, studying a sub-code still means studying a code, even if it does not relate to the entirety of the cinema. Inversely, a textual study, even if the text is longer than a single film, remains pluri-codic and retains the pertinence of the concern for a singular totality (= combination of codes in a 'textual system'). Anyone who undertakes the structural analysis of the classical Western will be interested just as much in its non-cinematic codes

(the concept of honour, the theme of the horse, etc.) as in its cinematic codes (long shots, treatment of wide open spaces, slow pans, etc.), and even more so in the manner in which the two are articulated with each other. Anyone who studies the cinematic sub-codes specific to the classical Western can only ever study them one by one, and by definition they will neglect the non-specific sub-codes. For both these reasons, they will never (in spite of what the exterior contours of their corpus might suggest) deal with the classical Western as such, in its entirety, but only with a certain number of rather precise schemata, about which they will observe, in each case, that they are not at work outside of the limits of the classical Western.

When structural analysis involves more than one film, it apprehends a *group of films*. When the study of a code becomes the study of a sub-code, it apprehends a *class of films*. On the one hand, we have a single and total, albeit pluri-filmic, text. On the other hand, we have a set of manifestations of an abstract, partial matrix.

*Bellour*: Do you find that semiology can reach, by pinpointing codes, what film analysis can only encounter in its general undertaking to read an imaginary object: that which formally marks the place of the enunciating subject, and thus refers back to a symbolic order which can only, in the last instance, be articulated in the field of psychoanalysis?

*Metz*: There certainly exists, in films, codes that relate to the enunciating subject – or more precisely to its mode of presence in the filmic discourse (for it is evidently not the person of the ‘author’ that is important *per se*). Like you, I think that Freudian psychoanalysis is the only possible basis for a serious study of codes of this order. But I am not sure that these codes (*all* of them) are specifically cinematic. To a large extent, the configurations explored by psychoanalysis are located, more or less unchanged, outside of the cinema, and invest the most diverse cultural objects.

In this aspect, I am not opposed to the terms of your question, but to a widely held opinion according to which the *film-object* retains in its own right a relation with the mechanisms of the unconscious (and in particular with the primary processes) that is more intimate and radical than other forms of expression, such as the book. We are often told that a film is like a dream, and that a dream is like a film. We emphasize the *visual* nature of the film. This idea has had a number of advocates in France during the time of the ‘avant-garde film’ and surrealist cinema. Right now, it is seeing a revival (Lyotard, Green, Chasseguet-Smirguel), which assumes much more subtle and nuanced guises. Nonetheless, I remain somewhat perplexed as to



the connection suggested between the visual nature of a film and a type of specific and supplementary coefficient of 'psychoanalyticity', which would distinguish cinema from other languages.

I have found all the 'dream sequences' that I have seen in films to be fanciful and not overly true to life. Ordinary sequences, meanwhile, although they may be composed of images, seem to me to have no relation with the phantasmatic flux (I would, however, make an exception for certain passages in Buñuel, Fellini and a few others). Inversely, we can only be struck by the importance of the analytic level in written texts, musical works, etc. We could thus think that, to the extent that the analysis is structural in nature, it does not acquire a special force by the singular virtue of its material of expression (= visuality and motion).

I still do take into account that it would be absurd to deny the privileged relations uniting the image and the dream. However, I presently know of no text – at least in the domain of film theory – that comments on these relations even in a somewhat convincing fashion.

*Bellour:* I wonder if, in spite of the reserves that any overly simplistic assimilation between film and dream, or between the mechanisms of the unconscious and the process of filmic discourse, can incite, the cinematic phenomenon is not susceptible – on the level of a specificity linked more to the material of expression than to the nature of its codes – to being marked more directly on the side of certain structural categories in psychoanalysis: in particular, narcissism (through the implications specific to the moving image, as a mirror and a site of the visual reduplication of, and the fascination for, the body), and hallucination, doubly visual and auditory, and strengthened through this very relationship. But my excessively elliptical question in fact targeted something else.

I wanted to return to the cinematic problem of *point of view* in order to know if, beneath every systematization of a psychoanalytic nature (founded, for example, on the system of identifications, as we can see very explicitly in the work of Hitchcock), you think that the interplay of looks can make the object of a specific code susceptible to, on the one hand, permitting a certain codification of the performance of the actors, and on the other hand, determining the syntagmatic links that mark the place of the enunciating subject in the image, in the same way that the linguistic paradigm does for grammatical 'persons'.

*Metz:* Maybe not *like* the persons of a verb do in language systems. But in another manner, yes, absolutely. You have studied these problems very

precisely in analyses of filmic sequences in far greater detail than I myself have done. But quite so, your analyses are foremost among those that have me think that 'point of view', in the cinema, gives rise to extremely elaborate and largely specific constructions, of which we should formally take stock.

*Bellour*: In order to illustrate your *grande syntagmatique*, you have carried out an exhaustive inventory of the autonomous segments in Jacques Rozier's feature film *Adieu, Philippine* [1962], which comprises the third section of your book. In this sense, you have preferred to follow a code throughout a single film rather than spread your description across several films. Do you think it is possible and instructive to attempt – from within a strictly semiological perspective – this descriptive operation in order to somehow reduce the filmic material, by articulating, in a single film, *all* the codes recognized as specifically cinematic?

*Metz*: It would be really desirable, but I do not think it is currently possible. For, to do this, it would be necessary: 1) to possess at least a rough list of the specific codes; 2) for each of these codes, to possess a 'model' of functioning which, even on a hypothetical level, would be sufficiently precise to be either confirmed or repudiated by the analysis of a film.

These two tasks are logically primary. If we do not have a preconceived idea of what we are looking for in a film, we can 'view' it without seeing anything at all.

In contrast, each time a hypothesis reaches a certain degree of precision – even if relates to a single code – it is preferable to submit it, without delay, to the test of an *entire film*, or several films.

*Bellour*: I would like, in conclusion, to return to the relationship that unites and divides film analysis and film semiology, which you distinguish in your upcoming book by the object that they determine: in the case of the former, *film writing*, in the latter, *film language*.

In a sense, everything, ideally, brings them together. We can indeed think of them as strictly intertwined with one another: with analysis resting on the acquisitions of semiological description, in order to recognize, in any textual system, the proper function of cinematic codes determined by the articulation of all the system's codes – thereby returning to semiology a positive image, permanently enriched by its codes, in a flawless logical reciprocity.

Alternatively, however, I wonder if the movement of analysis, and its own exigencies, do not fatally contradict this harmony: think of codic plurality

(which you have correctly insisted on), which necessarily inscribes the analysis of the field of human sciences, thus posing at each moment the prejudicial question of a unification of the epistemological field, primarily between linguistics, historical materialism and psychoanalysis. Or we can think, more modestly, of one of the immediate effects of this state of affairs, which leads the analyst, for the sake of the relations of desire implied by all analysis, to break up [*découper*] its own units rather than adopt those of semiology, even if it recognizes their rich, precise nature. In short, I wonder if, in spite of the essential and multiple areas of overlap that prohibit us from choosing one of the two movements without finding ourselves immediately thrust towards the other, there does not remain a distance (presently almost irreducible) between them, which is marked both in the strict distinction maintained by you, as well as in the playfully transgressive indecision which enables Barthes to keep the wager of *S/Z* (Paris, Seuil, 1970).<sup>2</sup>

*Metz*: It is difficult for me to respond to your question, for it has the fullness of an answer, and it is impossible for me to answer your answer, since I find myself in total agreement with what you say.

In other words: we cannot accept that the law is perpetually aligned with the fact, but nor is it desirable to always (and at all costs) forcibly align the fact with the law.

As long as the study of codes and the study of texts have not accomplished a real convergence, the former will retain a rather skeletal, emaciated allure, while the latter will continue (in spite of everything, including its considerable internal progress) the old tradition of the *explication de texte*. This is why this convergence, to my mind, constitutes a (distant) objective of critical importance, the principles of which should now be posited as a major goal for future research.

But, in order for this convergence to be realized, both approaches must affirm themselves, develop themselves and *live*. And for this, we must let them live. Research is not developed by applying programs, it needs to breathe.

You speak of the desire of those who study texts. We could speak just as much about the desire of those who study codes. Here there is much more than (and something other than) a sort of division of labour within a harmoniously organized 'scientific collective': this rationality itself – which is nowhere to be found – is a phantasm, the phantasm of the scientist.

Researchers have a kind of official morality, which is an *ethics of knowledge*. And yet, it is clear that the real motivations of scientific work,

like any other activity, are akin to drives, because researchers are people. This presence of the affective at the root of intellectual discourse is not something to be deplored: without it, nobody would have written anything.

Every researcher, at every moment, can only speak usefully about what matters to him as a subject (in all the senses of the word). One of the consequences, among many others, is what we have just discussed: the study of codes and the study of texts have difficulty in truly being articulated with one another.

But it seems to me to be indispensable to equally maintain, in principle, the demands of rigor and communicability – for they too can respond to personal investments that give them the opportunity to be realized in one form or another.

In sum, we must be capable of a certain kind of empathy. At one and the same time, we must make the effort to forge a path straight ahead, and accept that we must occasionally make a sideways turn.

## Notes

1. [Raymond Bellour, "System of a Fragment (on *The Birds*)," in *The Analysis of Film*, ed. Constance Penley, trans. by Ben Brewster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 28-67.]
2. [Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Hill and Wang, 1974).]