

6. Conversation on *The Imaginary Signifier* and *Essais Sémiotiques*

Christian Metz, Jean Paul Simon, and Marc Vernet

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Abstract

In this interview, carried out for the journal *Ça-Cinéma* in 1979, Christian Metz looks back over his research (published in the two collections *The Imaginary Signifier* and *Essais Sémiotiques*), the changes his work has undergone, and mentions the latest developments in his research, including his interest in experimental cinema.

Keywords: Christian Metz, film theory, psychoanalysis, experimental cinema

“Conversation sur *Le Signifiant Imaginaire* et *Essais Sémiotiques*.” Jean Paul Simon, Marc Vernet, and Christian Metz. *Ça-Cinéma*, 16 (January 1979), pp. 5-19. Reprinted with the permission of Jean Paul Simon and Marc Vernet. Translated by Daniel Fairfax.

1. Analysis, the cinema and the lost ‘object’

Jean Paul Simon: We often hear that ‘semiology makes its object disappear’, but this phrase seems to rest on a dangerous confusion between the object of common sense as it already exists, and the object as it can be produced in a model of intelligibility by semiological analysis and theory. What is more, it also expresses the idea that any methodology whatsoever can take a pre-existing object and that, at the end of the process, this object will be closer to what it was in ‘reality’.

Christian Metz: When film semiology is accused of making its object disappear, the term 'object' derives from the traditional approach to the object. And it is quite true that, up to a certain point, semiology sidesteps this object (but it also opens up a different film-object).

Common discourse deems it self-evident that the cinema is nothing other than a collection of 'works of art' – some successful, others failures – which one discusses in aesthetic or journalistic-impressionistic terms. Semiology, of course, will never encounter this cinema. But it is not *the* cinema. In its definition there already enters, surreptitiously, a good dose of methodology, even if the method, in this case, is rather soft and feeble.

Simon: Another version of the question above is: 'but where is the cinema in all this?' Most of the time this presupposes the existence of films that, by their very nature, are excluded from semiological approaches.

Metz: I am convinced that what we have here is an additional misunderstanding. It is correct that certain films have been analyzed more often than others from a semiological perspective, or according to the various procedures of 'textual' study: whence the relatively widespread impression that there are films that are intrinsically 'semiological', and that they are (*rightfully*) more accessible than others to rigorous decomposition or structural analysis. We sometimes hear this about experimental films, which are supposedly 'non-semiological' (but inversely, let us not forget, other experimental trends, such as 'structural film' or the Werner Nekes tendency, conceive of their productions as being cognitive, self-reflexive and metalinguistic in nature; so the problem is complex even within non-narrative cinema).

Nonetheless, it remains true up to the present, and it would be dishonest to deny it, that the semiological method has been applied more often to films of a largely 'classical' nature (which does not mean that they are banal, or commercial: the list of films most often studied from a semio-textual standpoint includes *North by Northwest* by Hitchcock, *Muriel* by Resnais, *October* by Eisenstein, etc.).

In my opinion, it is purely a matter of circumstance, of the chronology of semiological research, which began, quite naturally, with more or less narrative objects – that is, objects that are socially more common (this is important, to the extent that all semiologies involve an element of sociology, a project of socio-historical critique), as well as films that are 'easier' to analyze (to once again speak hastily); easier, that is, at least initially, for an approach that is still in its early stages.

Today, before our eyes, things are already beginning to change. A true semiology of experimental cinema is in the process of being developed. I am referring, for example, to the research carried out by Dominique Chateau and his colleagues, the work done by Thierry Kuntzel, or the work of Bernhard Lindemann in Germany, who has just dedicated an entire book, based on semiology and textual analysis, to experimental cinema (= Snow, Lawder, Frampton, Emshwiller, *Un chien andalou* by Buñuel, *Entr'acte* by René Clair, *Ballet mécanique* by Fernand Léger), titled *Experimentalfilm als Metafilm* (*Experimental Cinema as Metacinema*), published in 1977 in Hildesheim, by the Olms publishing house.

This evolution is reflected in my own preoccupations. Experimental cinema interests me more than it used to. Whence the long supplementary notes on this subject that I have added to older texts reprinted in my *Essais sémiotiques* (cf., above all, pp. 167-168 and 172-173).

Marc Vernet: In your latest work, you insist that the more semiology advances, the more narrowly it focuses in on its object, only looking at a small part of a film, a small part of a text.

Metz: This is true, but it seems to me that this is the flipside, or the inevitable corollary, of any deeper undertaking and rigorous study. In a recent, short review of my books, you yourself speak, humorously and fittingly, of the virtues of myopia... We cannot study something in depth if this something covers, at the same time, an immense area. This restriction is not specific to semiology, it imposes itself on any serious reflection on any object whatsoever.

Vernet: Here, there is a bizarrely pleasurable process: I launch myself into the analysis of a film that pleased me, I imagine that my analysis will tell me why and how the film is pleasing, but I can only study one small segment of the film – one code, for example, among the multitude of codes that compose the film – and so I cannot really grasp this pleasure. ...

Metz: I readily agree with you, but on the condition of adding this point: the pleasure of analysis is qualitatively different to the pleasure of viewing a film, which first establishes itself at the level of the whole film (or more exactly of the film in its entirety, even if certain parts were not especially 'pleasing' to the spectator) – by this I mean a certain type of affectivity, which sustains cognitive functions (this does not entail falling back into an opposition between the intellectual and the emotional, which is absurd

and populist [*poujadiste*]). The pleasure of analysis derives from the act of dissecting a film (then synthesizing it), from the impression of understanding, examining and clarifying it. This is why this pleasure (a different type of pleasure) can be fully felt with a *segment* of the object or problem being studied, at the moment in which this segment has truly been 'mastered'.

2. Cultural illegitimacy and its perverse effects

Simon: Does this not engage the status of this film-object as it is commonly understood (but also what it can represent for the imaginary of the researcher), in terms of its relationship with the legitimate objects that we do or do not feel the need to study?

Metz: I believe that this *deficit* in the cultural legitimacy of the cinema (in Bourdieu-Passeron's sense of the term) raises three kinds of perverse effects that are triggered in a chain reaction, one after another. Each effect is the equal and opposite reaction of its predecessor, over-compensating for its drawbacks.

The first perverse effect of this illegitimacy (and the most quantitatively widespread of the three) is the idea that the cinema is not a serious subject. Serious people do not bother with it, and they leave the job to others who are willing to tackle it. An example is film criticism in the daily newspapers (with, thankfully, a few exceptions).

The second perverse effect resides in those pathological forms of cinephilia. The cinema arouses, among certain individuals, feelings of passionate love, leading to an overestimation of the object (as Freud would say), and an imaginary, effusive, excessive allegiance to it. These are inseparably linked, by a dialectical reversal, to the cinema's status as an unrecognized art form (= it has to be vindicated). This is the source of a certain type of fanatical discourse, which we have all heard. Between weak-minded discourse and fanatical discourse, it is not all that easy to speak of the cinema in a rigorous manner, or even simply in a calm and precise manner. A possible definition of semiology, or at least good semiology (which is not the only type, far from it) is this: calm discussion of the cinema. The aesthete attacks semiology with fury, because the semiologist does not return *his* object to him: the aesthete's object, which the aesthete calls 'cinema'.

The third perverse effect: semiological fanaticism in all its various forms: delirious semiotizations, loose approximations claiming to be Lacanian, heavy platitudes, pseudo-linguistic studies, etc. In a word: *leaden discourse*

[*discours plombé*] (which is, by the same token, dispiriting [*plombant*]). This is an awkward, somewhat pathetic attempt to react against the discourse of derision (= level 1) and against the discourse of illumination (= level 2). Semiology thus becomes a miracle remedy, the gadget of the century, the key that opens every door, the raft that rescues us from all shipwrecks. But in reality this discourse is the shipwreck of semiology itself, for what defines the true spirit of semiology is the very opposite of this arrogant, philistine imperialism. Semiology is a modest approach, very slow-moving, patient, constantly open to external relations and constantly placed under interrogation.

Vernet: With the third perverse effect we have a double lover: the lover of semiology and the lover of cinema. ...

Metz: The former risks being doubly mistaken.

3. Linguistics and psychoanalysis as detours

Vernet: There is a double restructuring in your work: a restructuring of semiology, insofar as it must first pass through a certain number of disciplines, which represent detours and sites of investment, and a restructuring of the cinema, which can no longer be envisaged in the framework of a partial approach. ...

Metz: By speaking of investment and detour, you make me think of something else, a point I have not developed very far, and where the situation, too, has not changed much for ten or fifteen years. There was a time when I thought that, in order to do semiology, we had first to pass through a considerable *linguistic detour*, to really learn linguistics, dedicating several years to the project. Later, I had the same feeling about psychoanalysis. But today I feel that if, for me, these two 'detours' were indeed very important, then this is because I find linguistics and psychoanalysis very interesting in and of themselves, and not because a rather strong dose of these two disciplines would be truly indispensable for film research. It is not an unimportant matter to rectify this point, because an overly weighty 'recycling' of disciplines external to the cinema can justifiably frighten away or discourage certain young researchers whose objective is the cinema itself. This is why I have become ever more careful about speaking of a linguistic (or psychoanalytic) 'inspiration' rather than a 'method'.

When it is said that semiology owes a lot to linguistics and psychoanalysis, this is quite true, obviously, in comparison to other types of discourse on the cinema, which owe nothing to these two scientific fields. It is also true when it comes to the guidelines of the semiological method, its founding principles, its major inspirations (I am using this word again, and not by chance), and, I would almost say, its state of mind (and this is of major importance, undoubtedly).

But in another sense, it is false. It is false because, among all the linguistic and psychoanalytic notions and procedures, only a small fraction of them are usefully exportable to film studies (otherwise there is the risk of transplanting, which is the worst of all forms of semiology). Only the great foundational texts of these fields are of use to semiology (but in these cases, one must really know the texts).

In my individual journey, which is not a model for anybody because it is linked to a unique biography and temperament, two quite distinct things have been confused: my adoption of two tutor-disciplines in order to renew film studies, and the very strong attraction these disciplines exerted on me by their very nature, beyond any preoccupation I might have for the cinema. At the École des Hautes Études, before commencing my seminar on the cinema, I taught 'pure' linguistics (to which, even recently, I dedicated an article in *Essais Sémiotiques* and several sections of the other articles in my book). Another example of this: in *The Imaginary Signifier*, when I talk about metaphor and metonymy, a relatively long passage consists entirely of proposing a new theory of censorship [pp. 253-65]: this is a purely psychoanalytic problem, which does not specifically concern the cinema (psychic censorship applies to all of social life).

But those who have the goal of studying only the cinema, even from an authentically semiological point of view, do not have to make a linguistic-psychoanalytic journey as long as mine, because my journey owes much of its length to extra-cinematic preoccupations.

Simon: With respect to this relatively old article from *Essais Sémiotiques* where you say that semiology must be linked to linguistics, would you now tend to think that it is sufficiently autonomous?

Metz: Yes. It is, in any case, more autonomous than it was when I wrote the article you are speaking about (the one called 'Les Sémiotiques,' written in 1965 [*Essais Sémiotiques*, pp. 9-30]). Within this question of the linguistic (or psychoanalytic) detour, we touch on another factor, one that is distinct from my personal tastes: the objective evolution of the field over the last

15 years. Film semiology, whatever its worth, has undergone development; it is a little more sure of itself, it has less need of being vouched for by tutor-disciplines; it continues to borrow from them, but more freely and with less rigidity. I found it striking that the most robust research on cinematic codes and texts are from writers who do not claim any special knowledge of linguistics (e.g., Raymond Bellour) or psychoanalysis (e.g., Michel Marie).

There is also something else, which is that linguistics and psychoanalysis, for their part, have in the meantime pursued their own, autonomous, increasingly technical development, one in which cinematic preoccupations, as far as I can tell, are playing a weaker role. The film semiologist who wishes to really 'follow' all these recent developments runs a great risk of exhaustion, even if only because of the amount of reading he would have to do. Let us take the case of linguistics: three-quarters of present-day research is situated in transformational generative theory, or research that extends and supersedes it, like generative semantics, the grammar of cases, sociolinguistic variation, etc. We cannot wait for all semiologists to become well-versed in this research (even if it is exciting), because it is so difficult. Only a few semiologists are keeping pace with it, those who chose to apply these precise procedures to their object, like Dominique Chateau and Michel Colin in film studies.

That said, I still feel it is impossible to study seriously a social practice of signification like the cinema without a minimal knowledge of linguistics and psychoanalysis. It is with respect to the exact size of this minimum (which should not be too minimal!) and its quantitative determination that I have modified my evaluations, by 'lowering' them.

Simon: I had the impression for a while that 'strictly' cinematic preoccupations were quite frequently excluded from your seminar. Many people thought that it was not useful to go to the cinema; what mattered was the acquisition of linguistic or psychoanalytic competence. The investment in a complete object is transferred to theory and not to the cinema.

Metz: I too felt this about my seminar, but I believe that it was an evolutionary phase, the 'negative moment' if you will: a reactive period where we opposed the dominant aesthetic discourse. At some point, however, we bent the stick too far in the other direction: we stopped speaking about the cinema and semiologists took themselves for linguists, or psychoanalysts, or theorists of ideology and the 'Ideological State Apparatus'. Since then, things have changed, and, I feel, for the better: the participants in my seminar have

retained the (salubrious) habit of speaking about a bit of everything, but they are also beginning to speak about the cinema again. Bit by bit, things are being put back into perspective.

In one's personal development, you also find reactive phases. Thus, in the initial period of my project, from 1962 to about 1970, I went to the movies less often than I did during my cinephilic, ciné-club youth. I did still go to the movies, but not very often, about once or twice a week. And then, I started going again. At present I watch four or five films a week. It is also not really a question of the number of films, because this can vary due to external factors (one's work schedule, the neighborhood one lives in, how overworked one is, etc.). What I mean to say by all this is that, once again, I love going to the movies.

Simon: Is there not, alongside this reactive position towards cinephilia, another attitude that involves the desire to acquire competence in linguistics or psychoanalysis, without feeling the need to go to the movies?

Metz: You are right, but there is, I believe, something else that comes into play, and that distorts the problem, which is that *competence in a formalized discipline* and competence in a non-formalized discipline are two very different things. In principle, an apprenticeship is necessary in both cases, but between the two the type of apprenticeship needed is so distinct that we almost have two autonomous definitions of the word 'learn'. Learning a non-formalized discipline, like the history of cinema for example (or staying up to date, even in great detail, with contemporary cinema as it evolves), merely involves recording factual data and general impressions. That is, it involves filling your head with material, but not changing your ideas. On the contrary, someone who starts off without any knowledge of linguistics (or psychoanalysis, which is formalized in its own way), and who sets out to gain knowledge of the field, even if only at a basic level, is obliged to go through a genuine process of apprenticeship: they, too, must ingest factual data (= dates, books, authors, etc.), but in addition to that they are led to modify their mental universe, their habitual ways of reasoning, and to acquire, even if only in summary form, an authentic 'education'; it is not enough for them to gather information, they must change their way of thinking.

This, in my opinion, goes some way to explaining the 'reactive' period we just spoke about: many semiologists, in this period, dedicated their energies to 'real' apprenticeships, everything else was shunted into the background.

4. On classical film theory

Simon: '[Classical] film theory', it seems, is of great importance to your work, yet at the same time it is relatively absent from it. It is present because it is so often cited, but absent because it does not intervene anywhere.

Metz: In the early stages of my work, traditional film theory was of great importance; I am thinking of some of my initial articles, like, for example, "Cinema: Language or Language System?" or my two long texts on Mitry. I spent several years reading the major theorists, and they 'resurfaced' in my work, not only in the form of ritual footnote references, to spice things up, but also because they truly nourished and enriched my own outlook. Film theory was one of the major sources of semiology (by the way, I already said this very clearly; see pp. 92-93 of volume I of my *Essais sur la Signification au Cinéma* [*Film Language*, pp. 90-91]).

But a kind of backlash has also taken place, relating to the very existence of semiology, and more generally modern thinking on the cinema. These approaches are more rigorous, more detailed, more conceptually elaborated and more in step with contemporary science than was classical aesthetic theory. The latter had, therefore, by force of circumstances, found itself somewhat devalued, *obsolescent* – which, by the way, is a common phenomenon in the history of all disciplines (for example: the mere existence of generative linguistics has dealt a heavy blow to structural and distributional linguistics). This effect, of course, is not retroactive, except in the eyes of hurried, muddled minds who merely follow fashions. Eisenstein, Balázs, Arnheim, Bazin, etc., still retain their interest, which is considerable. Nevertheless, it is no longer possible *today* to write a book 'à la Balázs', or 'à la Epstein'.

Simon: Are we not falling back into the same problem we had before regarding film 'culture' – with the exception that, in spite of everything, film theory is more apt to be formalized?

Metz: Quite true. In this respect, [classical] film theory occupies an intermediate stage. Unfortunately, among the various 'fields of knowledge' [*savoirs*] we have been talking about, it is by far the least favored, in my seminar and elsewhere, and in practically every country (it strikes me), apart from Italy. There are people who know linguistics, who know psychoanalysis, who know films, but there are few who know classical film theory, or who even have an inkling of its richness and breadth.

Simon: Has there not been, in your work, a phase that we can locate in other developments in semiology; namely, the phase of critical re-evaluation, which consists of taking earlier texts as a basis for a more 'modern' reflection?

Metz: To tell the truth, in the current phase of my work, I am less often concerned with classical film theory than I used to be, but this is the normal evolution of every author constructing their own discourse. And there remains the fact that, throughout my writings, I have spoken about it rather often.

There is also a remarkable thing (I am departing from your question a little here): certain detractors have accused semiology, or have accused me personally, of giving short shrift to classical film theory. And yet they use it in their own work much less than I do. In certain cases, they are hardly even familiar with it, like the thief who shouts out: 'Stop, thief!' For instance, who speaks about Rudolf Arnheim today? As far as I know, only three people in the entire world, all three of whom are semiologists or 'fellow-travelers': Keiji Asanuma in Japan, Emilio Garroni in Italy, and myself in France. Another example: among those who claim that semiology makes a clean sweep of the past, who has undertaken the work of 'rereading' it patiently and at length, to the same extent as I have with my work on Jean Mitry's two major volumes? [*Esthétique et Psychologie du Cinéma* (1963, 1965)]

In truth, one of semiology's contributions has been to return classical film theory to the agenda, or at least it has done everything possible to make this happen. Even today this theory is poorly known, but 15 years ago it was almost totally ignored.

5. From one logic to another

Simon: It seems to me that there is another source that constantly nourishes all of your texts, namely 'logical competence'. An example of this is your text on connotation in volume II of *Essais sur la Signification au Cinéma t. II*.¹ There is a whole section of the text (which you have not included) that is an analysis of the preceding logics of the notion of connotation.

Metz: Yes, this is true.

Simon: However, in *Essais* vol. II the only part of this text that is reprinted is the part that is directly linked to the semiological analysis of film. Can you give an account of this publication (or work) strategy?

Metz: I think that the first part of my seminar on connotation (which was held in 1971-72, I believe), the part that I did not reprint in the published text, was didactic in nature, rather than a personal research project. It thus had a place in the context of a seminar (which allows room for both new research and historical review), but not in a research book, which by definition excludes the latter (it would only have been publishable in a textbook).

But to respond to your question on a more general level, yes, indeed, a certain logical horizon is always more or less present in my work.

Simon: This is very clear in *Essais Sémiotiques*. ...

Metz: Yes, and to tell the truth this comes from the fact that the linguistic approach and the psychoanalytic approach both constitute kinds of logic. Modern linguistics is close to logic, and it is becoming ever more so, notably with generative semantics (see the notion of 'natural logic'). Psychoanalysis, with its concept of primary and secondary 'processes' – particularly in its Lacanian orientation – also becomes, so to speak, a logic of mental trajectories, or a logic of the 'illogical'.

Simon: All your texts in *Essais Sémiotiques* are very strongly marked by the role of logic, for instance, in the way in which you discuss the work of Hjelmslev and Prieto, who enter into this framework via the logic of sets and problems of formalization respectively. You are probably the only person, along with E. Veron, to try to combine these two figures.

Metz: As a matter of fact, it seems to me that we should make the effort to combine the two aspects: on the one hand, 'secondary logic' with linguistics and logic properly speaking (the logic of logicians), and 'primary logic' with its condensations and displacements, its 'figurability'. ... This is all the more necessary because the primary is constantly present beneath the secondary. They are not truly dissociable from one another.

6. Semiology of communication and semiology of signification

Vernet: What, for you, are the consequences for analysis of the distinction between a semiology of signification and a semiology of communication?

Metz: To tell the truth, I think that the problem is posed with less acuity today than ten or fifteen years ago. In this respect, the situation around us has changed a lot. At a certain moment, these two forms of semiology – the semiology of signification (marked by the decisive influence of Roland Barthes) and the semiology of communication – appear as two options of equal importance; they divide the field in half. The semiology of communication had, for its part (and still does have), important works: especially Bussens, Martinet, Mounin and Prieto. But it has barely gone beyond these works, whereas, in the same period, the semiology of signification developed very rapidly.

Today, the semiology of communication has become a kind of sub-section within semiology *tout court*: a clearly demarcated domain, which I find very interesting, but which has clearly become a minor tendency. This does not mean that it is 'dead': in the case of iconic studies, for example, Michel Tardy's doctoral thesis, *Iconologie et Sémiogénèse* (Strasbourg, 1976, 2 vol.), which I am trying to have published at Klincksieck, is a recent example of an excellent work in the semiology of communication.

Simon: To what extent, however, does the development of this second semiology – where meaning is conceived of as an operation – render completely inadequate this distinction between signification and communication? The communicational model, as you present it, referring to Julia Kristeva, fully inscribes itself into a semiology that has the 'communication' aspect as one of its outputs.

Metz: We are increasingly reaching the point of conceiving of communication as an output, occupying the level that transformational generative grammarians call the 'surface', the ever-provisional effect of a deep level of signification, which is a production and not a product. It is always possible, and of great interest, to learn about the total process of signification through one of its end-points, where an emitter and a receiver are in agreement on the meaning of a given static unit. Hence, everyone in France would recognize that the words *cheval* (horse) and *jument* (mare) are divided along the axis of sex. But this is only the end of a long signifying journey, because it already supposes, in advance, the entire system of *gender* in French.

In all domains, including the cinema, we will find surface units that are codified (I mean codified in the ordinary sense of the word, since for me everything is coded). A semiology of communication can grasp them, enumerate them, classify them – this is important work. It is clear, for

example, that certain firmly established film ‘genres’ – like the classical Western, the musical comedy of the inter-war period, or ‘film noir’ in the 1940s and early 1950s – offer the analyst a genuinely real catalogue of stable and recurrent filmic configurations.

7. Signification as *deixis*

Simon: In fact, the semiology of communication presupposes symmetry between the level of the signified and that of the signifier. At one point you said, citing Prieto, that there is asymmetry between the two levels. Is this not what allows history to be reintroduced, for the discrepancies [*décalages*] between the two levels must be taken into account? At the same time it enables us to determine what is primary and what is secondary?

Metz: Yes, in a passage from my book *The Imaginary Signifier*, pp. 282-84, and 313n3, I focused on Prieto’s article, which was already dated (1957-58). It was one of his first texts, which he himself entitled ‘D’une asymétrie entre le plan de l’expression et le plan du contenu de la langue.’ He convincingly points to this asymmetry: only the signifier is concrete, manifest, directly accessible. But it seems to me that we can go further (today) and draw from his work an argument for a *semiology of the signifier*. The signifier – which in the cinema consists of images and sounds – is the only instance on which the analyst can hold a *factual*, completely verifiable discourse: a given camera movement lasts three and a quarter minutes (but, by contrast, what does it ‘express’?), a given motif recurs 19 times in the film (but what does this assertion ‘mean’?).

I do not speak about the ‘signified’ much (except in the case of fixed surface units: the punctuating fade to black, the shot/reverse-shot in dialogue scenes, etc.). I have increasingly come to prefer expressions like ‘significatory pressure’, ‘signifying circuit’, etc. We can never truly know what the signified is. It is akin to a spatial direction, a line of flight, a vector. This is not to say that it is ‘vague’. It is precise, in its own way, but it is precise as an orientation, not as an *emplacement*. In this orientation, the path is open to all overdeterminations, signification is always deictic in nature.

Vernet: We must then insist on this idea of signification and deixis as far the cinema is concerned, for what is designated is not the real, the referent, but only a line of flight of the signified.

Metz: What you say makes me think of a line of poetry that I will cite from memory without any guarantee of accuracy. I do not even remember who it is by anymore, who wrote it, nor who, in the discussions between Lacan and Lyotard on metaphor and metonymy, cited it and commented on it. This line, therefore, in my memory (or in my imagination), is as follows: '...medusas [jellyfish] of the dream in flowing robes...'.²

This is a good example of a signifiatory pressure. This is obviously a metaphor: medusa/woman. And also a condensation, because the metaphor is tendentially concentrated into a single image (= flowing robes). Nonetheless, the line does not mean that medusas 'are' women, nor that they 'resemble' women, nor that their bodies are 'like' a robe. This line functions more as a monstrative gesture: it indicates to us a *dream space*, a path along which the figure of the woman and that of the jellyfish can be associated with one another or superimposed on one another in a hundred different ways. And all this, at the same time, is very precise: we have a genuine logical operator, the word 'robe', which is the logical lever of a phantasmatic drifting [*dérive*]. Classical rhetoric would recognize, in the element 'gown', a *tertium comparationis*. This is, to a degree, what I call the circuit of signification, this mixture of the logical and the phantasmatic. ...

8. The problem of cross-classification

Vernet: One thing that strikes me in *The Imaginary Signifier*: the articles it includes are very often imprinted with what you call 'cross-classifications'. Does this not represent the abandonment of a purely taxonomic activity, where things would be monolithic, with a correspondence between a 'nice' name and a 'nice' phenomenon, in favor of the affirmation that everything is mixed, which was already apparent in *Language and Cinema*?

Metz: It seems to me that we are of necessity arriving at cross-classifications and formalizations presenting a certain degree of entanglement, for this alone responds to the complexity of facts, the filmic material itself. A very simplified example, but one that is at the heart of the problem, is that of the combination between two distinctions, paradigm/syntagm and metaphor/metonymy. I see no other solution than cross-classification (with, as a consequence, in this example, four major types of figures), for the simple reason that the two axes do not coincide: if the link between two elements of a given film is of a metonymic nature, there remains the fact that these elements can both be present on screen (= metonymy, syntagmatization),

but also that one of the elements can very well be the only one expressed in the film, evoking the other element which remains implicit, in which case we will have the same metonymy, but this time in the form of a paradigm. How can we do otherwise, given that the two 'entries' (metaphor/metonymy and paradigm/syntagm) are independent of each other?

Simon/Vernet: But is there not a risk that the inattentive reader will believe that as a result of an excessive desire to classify things, everything ends up becoming mixed up?

Metz: Like you, I have indeed noticed this type of reaction in seminars and other discussions, which proceeds from a frustrated expectation. Some listeners would have preferred a simpler, more brutal, more easily applicable and thus more reassuring 'grid'. But I cannot give it to them, for it would be utterly false. Some would have found it more gratifying for me to decree a general coincidence between the axes, which would have permitted assimilations by entire series. Deep down, I know very well, from the numerous discussions I have had with very diverse audiences, that what anxious readers *expected* was for me to say: 'On the one side, we have metaphor = paradigm = condensation = *découpage*, and on the other side we have metonymy = syntagm = displacement = montage'. The only thing is that this does not hold water, it is a caricature of semiology. ...

This said, my cross-classifications are nonetheless less complicated than people sometimes claim. When we find ourselves before a specific filmic moment, we situate it *successively* on the different axes, we have no need of keeping everything in our heads at the same moment. I have tried to show this with respect to the lap-dissolve, in pages 274-80 of my book *The Imaginary Signifier*. The only, singular *place* in which, by definition, we must mentally 'keep together' all the threads in the tangle of notions, is my book itself.

Vernet: You say somewhere that there is a possible way of speaking didactically about things, which sheds light on one point while obscuring another. And yet it seems that this is an attitude you refuse in *The Imaginary Signifier*, where you strive to hold all the elements together.

Metz: I have tried to be as clear as possible, since for me it is a question of honesty, or even, I would almost say, of professional morality *vis-à-vis* the reader. The more the material is complex, the more we should strive to give a clear exposition of it.

However, I do not believe that this effort from me has been able to completely annul the effect of an objective law, which you have alluded to, and which I speak about on page 268 of the same book: in order to shed light on one aspect of the problem, we are sometimes *forced* to obscure another aspect. In every book that is densely constructed, even to a moderate degree, and in any discipline, the successive chapters, at the same time as they add to one another by mutually clarifying each other, also *destroy* each other. There is nothing we can do about it, it comes from the fact that the signifier of written discourse is linear. It also relates to the fact that nobody's minds are unlimited places: the chapters 'follow' each other, and it is difficult for everybody to think of the whole work simultaneously. For some people it is even impossible. In the latter case, it can happen that the feeling of inferiority in the reader is transformed into aggressiveness. This is one of the sources – but not the only one – of the hostility towards semiology.

9. The primary and the secondary in language – The two 'depths'

Simon: Finally, what is the current status of the cinematic signifier, viewed both from linguistic discourse and psychoanalytic discourse, via Lacan's theories of linguistics? How are the pairings verbal/iconic and primary/secondary imbricated with one another?

Metz: This problem is obviously rather complicated. On the one hand, there is Freud's position on 'thing-representations' and 'word-representations': the unconscious only knows the former, whereas the pre-conscious incorporates both. Language [*langage*] would therefore be clearly on the side of the secondary process.

Lacan hit upon this point, arguing that the unconscious is itself structured like a language. At first glance, of course (and people have been ready to exploit this fact), the two positions seem contradictory. But as soon you explore a bit more deeply, I am convinced that they are much less contradictory than they would seem.

Firstly, something that everyone forgets is that 'language' for Lacan consists of processes, sequences of movement, and not necessarily elements, that is, representations. The latter can be verbal, but also iconic, or even 'mixed' (= ideograms, hieroglyphs, etc.). Nothing is opposed to images associating with one another following trajectories that are more or less linguistic in nature.

Subsequently, and above all, when Lacan is accused of this type of anti-Freudian *coup de force* that would (it is claimed) consist of making the unconscious secondary by treating it like a language, this is because *language itself is considered to be secondary* (otherwise the objection makes no sense). And yet, if anybody considers language to be secondary, then it is Freud – among others – but certainly not Lacan, to such an extent that it is difficult to see an internal contradiction in the latter. For Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language but (and these two things go together) language is largely primary. Moreover, it is not by chance that the Lacanian notion of ‘*lalangue*’ (in a single word) groups together the most secundarized aspects of language (that is, the language system [*la langue*] in two words, that of the positivist linguists) than other, ‘deeper’ or ‘overdetermined’ phenomena, like metaphor and metonymy, which are associative trajectories that do not come within the rubric of ‘pure’ linguistics, but which are much more closely tied to rhetoric and poetics (or an enlarged linguistics, which would in fact take the primary process into account).

In other words, what induces an error in many readers is the fact that Freud and Lacan do not have the same linguistics ‘behind’ them. Lacan is the first to have noted this, on page 676 of his *Écrits* [trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006)]. Freud had a relatively poor and restricted conception of language, in accord with the linguistics of his day, which was much less developed than today. Lacan has a wider, richer vision of linguistics, which excludes any reduction of the language-phenomenon to a secondary status.

Vernet: You should then clarify what you mean by deep language, or the depth of language. Are they operations that must be realized before we can even arrive at a definitive formation?

Metz: Yes, precisely. For example, the *work* of metaphor or metonymy (like we say the ‘dream work’ or the ‘work of mourning’) is a work that takes place in the history of the language system. It *is* the history of the language system; it is a work which displaces words, leading them to change meaning, and which consequently precedes a given, provisionally fixed, signified.

Simon: Is there not the possibility of confusion between the metaphoric sense of ‘depth’ as the site of something hidden that we need to reveal, and, on the other hand, depth in the sense given to it by generative linguistics, where we have a certain number of rules and transformations to carry out? It seems to me that sometimes, in “Metaphor/Metonymy,” there is a certain fluctuation between the two meanings of the word ‘depth’.

Metz: In terms of whether or not there is in my book any fluctuation between these definitions of ‘depth’, this is not for me to judge, but is up to the reader. There *is* fluctuation to the extent that I have not been clear and rigorous enough.

By contrast, I can give you an answer as to what was, in this respect, my objective (which in practice was attained to varying degrees). ‘Depth’ in the first sense you mention (= the hidden, the buried, etc.), and depth in the second sense (= the ‘deep structure’ in a generative logical process), which you correctly distinguish from the first, may well be two very different things, but they still have a relationship with each other. And in particular, if we want to try to understand and analyze depth number 1, we will end up proposing *dispositifs of knowledge*, which bring about depth number 2. It was in this spirit that I conducted my study of the lap-dissolve in the book. So as to better distinguish its multiple overdeterminations, I tried to situate it at the intersection of several logical matrices (syntagm/paradigm, metonymy/metaphor, etc.).

It goes without saying that I do not use the words ‘generate’ and ‘deep structure’ here in the technical sense that they have in generative linguistics, but there remains the fact that, even in their broader sense, they designate operations of a logical type. In sum, the reciprocal interlacing of the primary and the secondary does not only characterize text-objects, but also the very approaches taken by the analyst.

Conversation tape recorded in December 1977, and subsequently re-worked by the three participants.

Notes

1. [“La connotation de nouveau,” *Essais sur la Signification au Cinéma t. II* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972).]
2. [The line (originally ‘Les méduses du rêve aux robes dénouées’) comes from Victor Hugo’s poem ‘Dieu’. See, Victor Hugo, *God and The End of Satan/Dieu et La Fin du Satan: Selections: In a Bilingual Edition* (ed. and trans. R.G. Skinner, Swan Isle Press, Chicago, 2014), pp. 34-35. Trans.]