

8. A Seminar with Christian Metz: Cinema, Semiology, Psychoanalysis, History

Chaired by Rick Thompson

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Abstract

In this seminar discussion, published in *Media Centre Papers* in 1982, the participants investigate with Christian Metz the viability of analyzing film using psychoanalysis, the difference between Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the role of sociology in the theoretical study of film. Metz also mentions that he is beginning a new study, a psychoanalytic analysis of the joke.

Keywords: Christian Metz, film theory, psychoanalysis, film and sociology

‘A Seminar with Christian Metz: Cinema, Semiology, Psychoanalysis, History.’ Chaired by Rick Thompson. Published in *Media Centre Papers* 16, introduced and edited by John L. Davies (Bundoora, Victoria: La Trobe University, 1982), pp. 16–46.

Those identified in the discussion are:

Metz – Christian Metz

Thompson – Rick Thompson

Freiberg – Freda Freiberg

Rohdie – Sam Rohdie

Flaus – John Flaus

Davies – John Davies

Routt – William Routt

Martin – Adrian Martin

Thompson: Tonight's guest is Christian Metz. Professor Metz' new book has just arrived in Australia. It is called *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*. I think it would be appropriate to begin by asking Professor Metz about the current direction of his work – I understand there has been rather a significant change in the direction of your work at the moment: perhaps you could speak of that?

Metz: I would say rather a significant intermission in my cinematic work. I'm just now in the process of writing a book on jokes, on wit (*witz*). I started this book two years ago and I think it will take me another one and a half or two years. After that I intend to return to my cinematic interests which still remain active, but I felt the need to change the subject-matter, if not the method of my work, because when you have worked for a long time – twenty years in my case – on the same subject, you are in danger of repeating yourself. Very often people expect you, or invite you to repeat the same thing, and so I felt the necessity to, let us say, break with myself momentarily, and to produce a semiological and psychoanalytic book on another subject-matter, namely 'wits and jokes', starting from Freud's book, 1905 [*Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*], and criticising and developing it in a more elaborate way.

Well that is the first answer I can give before receiving other questions.

Thompson: You have been at the centre of both the first semiotics and the second semiotics; could you summarise your views on the state of French semiotics at the moment?

Metz: Yes. The current state of semiotics in France now is characterised mainly by a sort of hollow period. A coming down which is not necessarily a decline – I cannot predict the future – but what is sure is that we are inside the hollow period. This does not mean that semiotics has disappeared. The situation is somewhat different in France from other countries; in France semiotics has already become a part of the general culture and education so that it is a part of all sorts of studies – painting, literature, cinema, and it can remain very strong, in a sense, influencing all kinds of studies without remaining a separate school of semiotics as such, as we had in the beginning of the sixties. At the beginning things take the form of a school, very formal, and then it becomes more informal and diffused.

There is an exception, an important exception. There is one person in France who is continuing the semiotic undertaking as such, general

semiotics which has a vocation for replacing all the previous sciences, the knowledges, which is Greimas. Greimas is a very important semiotician with whom I don't agree, but he is continuing a school of general semiotics as such with a number of disciples, and he is continuing with the idea of semiotics covering the whole field of knowledge. So he has sub-groups in seminars, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, in the semiotics of painting, of semiotics of music and so on. The idea is to cover all things. Personally, I don't stand for this imperialist conception of semiotics because I am sure that semiotics cannot replace the other kinds of knowledge – but can only collaborate with them and bring its own enlightenment as a part, as one method among others.

Thompson: Can we open for questions?

Freiberg: In what way do you mean that semiotics is in a state of decline?

Metz: I'm not sure it is in a state of decline – it could be, I don't know, but I was speaking only of a 'hollow period' and what the future will be I am frankly unable to answer you. To some extent I'm sure that a certain number of basic concepts will remain because they are obvious – when we speak, now, in 1982, of signifier, signified, connotation, denotation, code, system, text, etc., it's no longer semiotics, it's obvious, we cannot do without them. They were brought in by semiotics in the sixties, so this part will remain, I'm sure, because everyone uses it and needs it.

Rohdie: While they have become part of the common speech they have also become less precise ...

Metz: Yes ...

Rohdie: ... so that their analytic strength – I can't say is less than void, but in one sense is very confusing. Words like 'text' or 'the textual' are used very loosely now, whereas at one point there were attempts to specify not only what those terms meant, but also they had a polemical and political edge attached to them. Notions of 'text', for example, were not simply descriptive notions, but brought a certain purchase on the way in which you conceptualised works, on the way in which you analysed works, and so on. Once that language of semiotics – and, indeed, at some prior period the language of psychoanalysis – became a common speech it also became de-natured and almost less useful.

Metz: Yes, I agree, it is a danger every time something diffuses. I see no means to avoid such a danger because it is the other side of 'working out', you know, of success. Except when you are a serious writer, a serious researcher, to make precise in every case that I am taking 'text' in the sense used by Hjeltmslev, or in the sense of Kristeva, and so on, you can do that and it is better so. Nevertheless, when a notion diffuses there is a danger that it becomes more vague.

Rohdie: On the other hand the terms themselves are by no means fixed and as you said there is 'text' according to Hjeltmslev and 'text' according to Kristeva and, indeed, most of those terms are subject to considerable debate depending on what theoretical position you might take, either towards various objects like the cinema or painting or various critical positions you might take with regard to semiotics. The terms on the one hand might be denatured but there is no fixed sense to exactly what they mean or what they refer to – or is there?

Metz: What is the danger exactly, in your opinion?

Rohdie: It is not exactly a danger. When one speaks about semiotics and if I think of a lot of your work, which has been concerned with defining, to a large degree, terms and concepts and fixing them in their relationships with each other, from the point of view of, say, cinema studies, teaching the subject or relating to your own work, I often feel there is an impulse towards a scientific description, and a setting aside of those terms, outside the polemic. From other positions the terms you seek to fix are the subject of quite serious debate and some kind of polemical edge. I was not implying any danger but responding to that question about semiotics in decline. The terms are by no means clear within the subject itself, but are also used in a sloppy and unclear fashion in an ordinary sense.

Metz: I am unable to answer you about the situation here or in other countries, but in France they are to a certain degree fixed and are no longer so controversial. There were very important controversies, but not now. This is for the very good reason that the notions of semiotics can be used by its enemies for their own purposes to the extent that the terms are formal ones and can be used for different political intentions.

Rohdie: Is that a notion that somewhere there exists a space in which the terms and concepts of semiotics are clear and precise, and another space where enemies and friends are using these terms for various battles – is that the sense you are suggesting?

Metz: Yes, but that you cannot avoid. It is not confined to semiotics. ...

Rohdie: Perhaps one could take the position that the terms have no fixity, and that the assertion about their fixity is a political position, and they have to be seen, for example, to have a certain lack of fixity. In so far as there is a debate about those terms, you seem to be saying that there is some space in which they are clarified and precise.

Metz: Yes, there is some space, but it is not much. It seems to me you are confounding two different things. On the one side to propose a fixed definition for those terms, and on the other side to demand from everyone that they take the terms in this very sense. It is quite different. I have devoted an important part of my work to conceptual definitions but I do not demand from any of my students that they take the term in this sense, only that they define in which sense they use it, in order to make things clear. It is not the same thing to propose a fixed definition as to impose it. The whole thing is about proposing/imposing.

Flaus: Let me offer you a possible example for your jokes. I am hearing you using the word '*defusion*' and I think you are intending the word '*diffusion*' – diffusion, a spreading, and '*defusion*' a taking away of meaning by force?

Metz: I was thinking of diffusion with an 'i'.

Flaus: I am hearing you also as de-fusion, taking the explosion out of it. Let me ask it this way – diffusion of the usage of the term, that it is passing from a smaller elite to a larger, less privileged ...

Metz: Oh, it is not at question, the beginners ...

Flaus: ... once the terms become accepted in the intellectual life of a community then they have passed from being in the sacerdotal domain, that is belonging to the priests and acolytes and they are then passed down to the faithful – and I understand that is what has happened to those terms – but I understand there to be a diffusion in the users and not a diffusion in the terms. Would that be so? It is not that the number of things they may be said to mean has increased but the number of users?

Metz: I do not understand what you mean by 'users'.

Flaus: In the sense that we say 'usage', users of any language, any system of communication. The number of users has increased which amounts to a diffusion of the usage, but not of the terms. Correct me if it's not what you intended, but in the distinction that Lévi-Strauss makes between nature and culture, that terms such as the ones you mentioned, let us say 'text', has passed from being seen as part of culture and it is now accepted as part of nature.

Metz: I would not agree. It has passed from a section of culture to another section of culture but it still remains social: the whole story remains social.

Rohdie: I wonder if I can ask one thing concerning the previous issue. If I took a set of terms which were now part of a semiotic, psychoanalytic, linguistic vocabulary – things like fetishism, sadism, scopic drive, or the signifier, and I looked at a work like *S/Z* [Roland Barthes, 1974] that employed those terms, and I looked at your own work, which also employed those terms, I would be very hard put to construct any kind of meta-language in the case of *S/Z* because the terms within that semiotic vocabulary would shift, within the work, as I was reading it; they would not have any secure place within the work itself. In the way that they were used I could not find some model which I could take out of the work and find meanings for. When I look at *The Imaginary Signifier* and the earlier 'first stage' semiotics, the more linguistically oriented semiotics of *Language and Cinema*, the impulse is towards constructing a meta-language of the cinema. They are not exactly definitional, but there are terms which form themselves into relational complexes so that you can speak of the cinema semiotics of Christian Metz as a system of constructed terms that can be re-applied and used.

Rohdie: When I was suggesting that there was something of a polemic, there is obviously a different impulse in the use of semiotic terms which in the end lose all their stability to one that is concerned with their stabilisation. If I compare one with the other there seems to me to be a whole position, not only about semiotics, but about their use, about texts and their function, and indeed about the function of the cinema. It would not surprise me to hear you argue that there is a systematic relational place for terms within a cinematic semiotics – but some would argue that there is not, that these terms cannot have any fixity, argued from similar positions to you. For example, they might argue it from their reading or understanding of Lacan. In so far as writing would involve them with desire the signs and signifiers they use would necessarily shift their meanings, change and alter.

Metz: Yes – you know, what I took from Lacan was only a general inspiration, very little. I have been reproached for using many psychoanalytic terms – whereas, in fact, I have taken from Lacan only four or five ideas – the Mirror Stage, metaphor as condensation, metonymy as displacement, only very well-known concepts. In Paris no one would call me a Lacanian – no one.

In my opinion we have a whole range of semiologies, more or less scientific, more or less literary. Roland Barthes' semiology was literary – he was a writer, a great writer, so the way he uses semiological concepts in *S/Z*, is arbitrary and this book is impossible to apply – but why should we apply it? That would be my question. It is a wonderful book and why should someone, anyone, apply it? Why should there be things to apply? I am very sceptical about the very notion of 'applying' because we are not in the domain of the physical sciences where you can really apply something.

I think that even the scientific side of semiotics is only an attempt to be more rigorous. In my books if you notice, I never use the word 'science' or 'scientific' – only the French word 'rigorous' – so I am very sceptical too, about semiotics being able to be a science because it is confusing to say 'science'. When we say 'science' we think of physics or chemistry where the degree of precision, of accurateness, of fullness or predictivity have nothing in common with semiology.

So we have many semiologies, some of which are more literary like *S/Z*, which is impossible to apply; some of which are applicable, such as my first books – if people wish to apply them. But – they were not written to be applied. They were written to clarify some problems and notions of cinema. This notion of applicability is possible only when the discipline has reached a very high degree of scientificity, then you can apply them.

Davies: Could I take this a little further and suggest that, at some level, you do seem to apply Lacanian theory to the study of the cinema. Maybe you will say that you only picked out what you need to?

Metz: Yes, exactly.

Davies: It is what you picked out that I find very interesting because this has been a problem for a number of years in understanding your intellectual development. For example, in *Film Language*, the first book of yours that I read, there was a very convincing argument against taking the iconic sign as being 'similar' to the linguistic sign – an argument that can be used just as convincingly in, what to me, is a battle between Freud

and Lacan. This seems to hinge over the one word ‘pictogram’ – whereas Freud thinks the pictogram is the initial way the primary processes become inscribed in the unconscious, Lacan seems to need to translate ‘pictogram’ in a linguistic sense; he really wants to call it a ‘hieroglyph’, and that very arguable hinge obviously cannot be open to any scientific or perhaps conceptual argument. Lacan is then able to later claim that the “unconscious is structured like a language” and we get a very linguistic view of the whole theory that traces its path back to Freud. If I am right in suggesting that Freud may well have been more correct than Lacan in that the initial inscriptions on the unconscious are iconic, only later to be transposed into some form of language, that seems to have grave implications, in, for example, how we see a film. I wonder why you found it necessary to import Lacanian theory – only “five or six concepts from Lacanian theory,” but they are integrated concepts which back each other up all the time – they come out specifically in *The Imaginary Signifier*, I think fairly uncritically on that point about iconic inscription. I wonder if you would like to comment?

Metz: There are at least two points in what you said. There would be a whole discussion about the relations between Freud and Lacan – it is a very complicated issue. Freud thought that the language system – not the language but the language system – was inscribed in the preconscious and that the unconscious had only icons, images. Whereas Lacan seems to say that the language – not the language system is the unconscious. What Lacan means by that is no longer the language system but what we call the ‘deep language’ – the language of poetry for example. We could be referring to the unconscious even in Freud because he very often speaks of wordrepresentations translated into thing-representations which is the equivalent in Freud of the Lacanian theory of language. Am I making myself clear?

So I am not sure – it would be another discussion – but as to the fact that Lacan and Freud disagree on this problem of language, I’m not really sure. I think that Lacan is confusing because of his presentation, his language which is very difficult to understand, but I’m really convinced that Lacan is totally a Freudian – behind each line of Lacan you have a sentence by Freud. Of course the style, the words, all is changed – it is hard to recognise and it takes much study.

On the disagreement about the level of language – whether preconscious or unconscious – I think that in reality both agree, but not as to the presentation.

Davies: There is another difference, I think, between Freud and Lacan concerning the exact boundary between the conscious and the unconscious which has implications on your later work. The way I characterise it Freud sees the unconscious/conscious boundary as a semi-permeable membrane through which concepts may pass via dreams, hypnosis or free association, whereas for Lacan it seems to be a much firmer juncture through which only desire can penetrate with meanings. You talk a great deal about the power of desire in terms of the cinema, especially in the latter part of *The Imaginary Signifier*. What would happen, for example, to instinctual identification, in a film that does not really address the concept of desire specifically, let us say, in a film that only addresses the instinctual forces of aggression? Can we do the same kind of thing for aggression that you have done for desire?

Metz: Oh no, it is not so. For Freud it was desire – it was no longer libido, but it was still desire.

Davies: Is not, for Freud, aggression still an instinctual drive?

Metz: Yes, it is.

Davies: So can we not, in theory, have a film that talks about aggression rather than desire?

Metz: I do not understand 'rather' because aggression is a desire. When you desire to aggress somebody ... or perhaps I misunderstand you?

Davies: So the model we have is of desire, as the boundary, and after that we have desire in its sexual form and in its aggressive form?

Metz: I am not convinced, you know. I feel the opposite – that the borderline between conscious and unconscious is stronger in Freud, which is natural because Freud began, and so he was thinking in stiffer terms, whereas Lacan explicitly says that, roughly translated by me, that 'behind each conscious phenomenon or action or discourse you have the active presence of the unconscious'. I think, on the contrary, that in Lacan the borderline is more flexible. It is not an obvious point, you know, you have to study the text of both, but I feel so.

Routt: The goal of psychoanalysis is a cure. One psychoanalyses a patient and the idea is that something will change and there will be a cure. The

language and the method has been derived towards that goal. What happens when one takes those concepts, those ideas and begins to apply them to something else – or – is there a patient to be cured in the analysis of cinema that you propose?

Metz: Yes, that's a very central point – an interesting question. Firstly, what you say represents, in my opinion, the limit to applying psychoanalysis to cinema, because psychoanalysis was conceived mainly in relation to therapy. Applying psychoanalysis to cinema has its limit, like everything. Secondly, you can apply psychoanalysis to film in many different senses. You can attempt to analyse – to psychoanalyse – the film-maker, it is a possible research. I am sceptical for the reason that you mentioned, that the film-maker is not in therapy and he cannot answer, he cannot react to what the analyst, in this case the film analyst, says. You can apply psychoanalysis to the filmic text where it becomes easier, but this also has its limitations because the text cannot answer, as you said.

What I am doing is a third kind of research which is to apply psychoanalysis to the code – to the social institution of the cinema. So it depends on where you apply psychoanalysis – to the film-maker, to the film, to cinema, to what?

Routt: To the institutional object, is there the possibility of some kind of therapy?

Metz: Oh no, there is no answer. You have the limit which was my first point – except when experimental films, for example, inspired by this kind of theoretical research begin to change the cinematic institution itself.

Rohdie: There is surely something of an answer because, as I understand it, one impulse for using psychoanalytic terms and in particular, Freudian and Lacanian terms, has been to see the subject as being formed and constructed by language, in this case, perhaps, the language of the cinema or within representation. There are places, for example there was at some period in *Screen* an impulse to demand a change in practices of representation in order to shift the position of the subject which had ideological and political implications, so that psychoanalysis was to a degree a political weapon aimed at a transformation, both a transformation of representation and of people's relation to that representation. Now, it might be stretching a point to think of that as a cure – it is not exactly covered by those categories that you presented – it is a slightly different impulse.

Metz: Yes, it is.

Rohdie: Both semiotics and – it is hard to say first stage and second stage of semiotics – but both linguistic concepts within semiotics and psychoanalytic concepts within semiotics have been used in part as a kind of descriptive discourse – not perhaps scientific, but it has been used as a weapon in different times and within different cultures. I think within that notion of it as weapon there is some notion of it as a cure involved. At least if not cure then at least change – and not simply as description?

Metz: Yes, but to start with, you were saying that psychoanalysis teaches us that the subject is formed within language. I would not say so. I would say that psychoanalysis teaches us that the subject is formed within society. This is how I understand psychoanalysis. The subject is formed by Oedipus – to make things simple, too simple – which has an obvious link to the restricted family and the restricted family has a very obvious link with certain periods in the economic evolution of the world, so for me – you have sentences in Lacan which are very clear – for me, psychoanalysis is the study of the imprinting of society in the person. You have the exterior society, the society proper, and you have the society imposed by force within the inner constitution of each person, and that is the very meaning of the Oedipus complex. Oedipus complex is a kind of symbol – for Freud it was too – a symbol that means that society imposes its patterns within the mentalities, the feelings, from childhood on. Of course, I know that many analysts in different countries – in the U.S.A., all; in France, many – who are convinced that the Oedipus complex is eternal and universal. But simply they are wrong – because it is impossible to think that Oedipus complex can have no relations with the social organisation of family structures.

Rohdie: But how do you know they are wrong?

Metz: Because it is obvious. How could you have an Oedipus complex – at least in the sense that has been described by Freud – in a community where the children are raised by several parents?

Flaus: There is research on this in Oceania where the function of both the repository of affection and also the administration of discipline is carried out by the brother of the father and in a matriachy, where one finds that families were organised and the State similarly, that such complexes would be absurd in relation to the mother. That is not to

deny the system which claims that one of the manifestations of it in our societies is universal. I do not think you were saying that the notion of complex as a system is untrue, but that its application in our society as a universal is untrue?

Metz: Yes. It depends on the conventions you adopt when defining the Oedipus complex. Whether it is a different pattern, but still Oedipean, depends on the conventions. In all cases when society changes over a long time the Oedipus complex changes or it could disappear – I do not know the future. If the family disappears in the long run Oedipus complex would disappear – or, perhaps, deeply changed.

Flaus: I understand that this was the root of the disagreement between Freud and Adler?

Metz: Yes, yes.

Flaus: Can I return to something else that was asked in relation to the question on psychoanalysis and cure. When we say cure we make certain kinds of judgements from the centre of the culture in which we live and perhaps 'adjustment' is a less committed way of describing that. We have in the literature of American psychoanalysts the work of Robert Lindner – who is perhaps known to the Cineastes here because he wrote *Rebel without a Cause*, even though they bought the rights to the book, used the title and threw the text away, that Lindner argued, in *Prescription for Rebellion* that 'adjustment' is the goal of so-called successful psychoanalysis and the notion of cure ought to be applied to the society rather than to the patient. I ask this question – and I'd like to think of it as an example of metaphorical thought – that perhaps there is a cure. This is where I would support Sam, in the notion of application, that if we can say that we apply psychoanalysis to the study of a particular film or film-maker, is every hermeneutic exercise itself an attempt to make a cure – because there is an area of disturbance or maladjustment between the knowledge held now and the knowledge we believe can be acquired. Each exercise to explicate is itself impelled by a need to cure – in other words, a cure is acquiring the knowledge not now held.

The awareness that there is some knowledge as yet unidentified, in which the search to find it and the finding are like an analogue of a cure – and in that metaphorical usage, yes, there is a cure going on in the psychoanalysis applied to film.

Metz: Yes, I agree with your second point. As to your first point, the question of the therapy, the cure being a kind of adjustment, it depends a lot on the countries – that is the American way of doing things. It is not the French one. It is the very reason why Lacan was ejected from the International Society of Psychoanalysis – refusing the adjustment – and in France this notion of the adjustment of the patient – so-called patient, he is not a patient – is foreign to a great number of analysts. In Lacan's school, and around it, recovering itself is considered as a 'secondary gain' (incidentally, it is a danger, the opposite one). But, is it because of poor adjustment that a person in the audience is unable to follow the action on the screen?

Flaus: That's a point about the process of perception, within identification. In the last decade or two we have seen a semantic shift in the word 'empathy' where 'empathy' and 'identification' have come to be the same thing.

Metz: Absolutely, yes, we too, use the word 'empathy' but mainly in relation to 'the cure'. It becomes close to 'identification', but nevertheless not synonymous.

Rohdie: Do you mean any polarity with the term 'projection' which [Edgar] Morin uses almost with projection?

Metz: Yes, yes, I know – no, in Morin's theory, which is very interesting, and a pioneer work, 'identification' is opposed to 'projection', but not in my theory. Only that this identification – to use the word – has both aspects and I make them precise, the introjective one (in Klein's sense) and the projective one. That would correspond to Morin by bi-polarity.

But to turn back to the question of an articulation between semiotics or psychoanalysis and the social or historical dimension, I think that the difficulty is that this linkage, this relation is very mediated, through many stages. Let us take an example – it is very easy to make a relation between sociology and semiology, at a trivial level. If you say, for instance, that films of the bourgeoisie have a bourgeois content (you have many books which say only that) – it's very easy. But if you study 'crossing-up montage' or 'fades', 'dissolves', precise things in the filmic chain and if you think how to relate these fades, dissolves and wipes with the bourgeoisie – well? There is a relation, but the chain is long and indirect and mediated – that makes it difficult.

Flaus: As a model for this, if I might suggest, we could study the shift from harpsichord to piano and the relation between this shift and what was the incipient bourgeoisie of the late eighteenth century, there is a model for

us to follow that has not been applied to the cinema – in works which are accessible to us in English, anyway.

Rohdie: If you only look at the articulation between linguistics and psychoanalysis as opposed to the articulation between cinema studies and economics, or linguistics and sociology, I guess it has probably come about through – as you say, unconscious forces. There were certain problems set within semiotics generally and also within the concentration on language, coming from Lacan, which brought one to the necessity for psychoanalysis in order to solve a particular set of problems. Psychoanalysis will continue to be used so long as those problems seem important and so long as psychoanalysis continues to yield the kind of results one wants. I would have thought there are reasons why linguistics and, say, for example, sociology or linguistics and economics have not been articulated with one another, as opposed to its articulation with psychoanalysis precisely because the way in which problems have been developed have not required that move. Perhaps the lack of this articulation requires an explanation, not of unconscious forces – or is it? – in such a large group of people? It seems quite clear that the articulation between linguistics and psychoanalysis is far from accidental. There were certain crucial problems within semiotics as well as attempts to – subvert isn't quite the word – it's too strong, but some way in which one could dismantle certain problems within semiotics. Psychoanalysis undercuts (by introducing notions about the subject and desire) much of the logical problematic that linguistically-orientated semiotics presented by introducing notions about the subject and desire. As soon as you presented the 'subject' and 'desire' representation took on a very different look. I am to a degree surprised when I read *The Imaginary Signifier* for, on the one hand what seems to me the maintenance of a semiotic project consistent with that of the earliest works concerned with specifying the cinema and defining its terms, and, on the other hand, a kind of language which is more rhetorical, more metaphoric, more self-referential, playful, and not exactly aligned with the project – the language is apparently there to explicate. If the language is to give certain rigorous clarity to specific notions about the cinema it avoids – I'm not saying that the language is not rigorous or clear – but it avoids some of that categorisation precisely because it is rhetorical, metaphorical and playful. It is not the language of Barthes but it is not the language of an earlier Metz, either.

Metz: It is hard to answer. First, I have the right to change my language! – I know I am joking – but this book, *The Imaginary Signifier*, is composed of

four articles and they are not on the same level. The three other essays are more rigorous and, I hope, more scientific, – at least they were written with this intention, especially the study on metaphor and metonymy. The first one is conceived in a more playful and 'literary' way – you are quite right.

Davies: I wonder if you would like to comment on the notion that, at least on one level, the choice of psychoanalytic theory was not an accident or a phenomenon of the collective unconscious but was a fairly decided political step because it presented people with a materialist analysis of the psyche alongside what had up to then, hoped to be a materialist analysis of the social sphere of the cinema.

Metz: You mean that it was not accidental in that it provided us with a materialist theory of the psyche – yes, in this sense, yes.

Davies: I think that might have something to say about a materialist analysis of jokes – is that what you are doing now?

Metz: Oh, I do not know if it is materialist – we'll see.

Flaus: May we ask, is it mechanist?

Metz: (Laughs) Hopefully not!

Davies: I said materialist, there, because I was thinking of another work that re-runs Freud's book on jokes by Timpanaro [*The Freudian Slip: Psychoanalysis and Textual Criticism*, New Left Books, 1976], the Italian, who has a particular and possibly quite different definition of materialism to the one that's accepted within semiotics. I find it incredibly complicated to delineate where these two views of materialism come from – sometimes 'materialism' seems like a portmanteau word to cover the interests of Marxist theory.

Metz: I don't think so. The difficulty is that materialism is often being confounded with Marxism, whereas Marxism is one very important form of materialism. For me, exactly as for you, there is no doubt that psychoanalysis is a materialist conception of the psyche. Freud was explicitly materialist, he thought that all so-called psychological phenomena were ultimately derived from the body. He took his ideas from Fechner – it was mechanistic materialism.

Davies: The problem then is how Timpanaro can write a profoundly anti-Freudian book about Freud's conception of jokes and still call himself a materialist and – it seems to hang together, too.

Metz: An anti-Freudian book?

Davies: It's not a critique of Freud's materialism but it is a critique of Freud's paths by which he arrives finally at the joke, the parapraxes. In other words we have a 'slip of the tongue' and a materialist conception of how to analyse that, while 'the slip of the tongue', itself, according to Freud, is overdetermined. Therefore, you can get to it through linguistic analogies, through geographically similar names, and so on, through many different paths – and the path that Freud chose is not the only path – Freud, in fact, says this quite often but forgets this after a while, and it becomes a single slip, slip, slip to the final joke. He was, of course, more interested in the system being constructed than the final punch line. I do not know how you handle that in terms of materialism, because Timpanaro's other book available in English is about his particular viewpoint on materialism [*On Materialism*, New Left Books, 1975] – or whether it's inherent in the kind of pathways, the choices of multiple pathways in the unconscious to arrive at the single symptom that comes out.

Metz: But you have not multiple pathways in a real situation of therapy, of cure – you have no choice. I was seven years on the cure. You have choices in books. There is a materialism of the signifier – there is, a very strong one. Theoretically, you have two paths. One of the two paths produces no result – no result at all, while the other path makes you upset immediately and produces a heavy symptom – so you have no choice, and no hesitation about the right one.

To turn back to the first part of your last question, the articulation between linguistics and psychoanalysis. I think it was rather easy, many reasons which we have heard – I would add one more, both sciences, linguistics and psychoanalysis, share the particularity which is very rare, unfrequent, to be involved with the very fact of meaning and it alone. To be involved with, let us say, the 'meaning of meaning' – to use the title of a famous English work – they are the only two sciences (we have no third one) which are involved only and directly with the very fact of the meaning, as such. I think this is a further reason which made this articulation rather easy, and even the main reason, by far.

Rohdie: I have a quote to ask you about ...

Metz: Please do ...

Rohdie: It is from Christian Metz – I am not quite sure I understand it.

Metz: Perhaps neither do I?

Rohdie: It comes from *The Imaginary Signifier*, I shall quote it to you: "Phenomenology can contribute to knowledge of the cinema [...] in so far as it happens to be like it, and yet it is on the cinema *and* phenomenology, in their common illusion of *perceptual mastery*, that light must be cast by the real conditions of society and man" [p. 53].

Metz: Ah yes – that was my personal Marxist revolution. (Laughter). I mean by that to take Hegel and put him on his feet, you know? Yes, but seriously, I was thinking of Bazin, when he speaks of the cinema as a kind of cosmo-morphism, a revelation in a nearly religious sense, a revealing of the world, a kind of cosmophany, so the revealing of the real world, which we do not see in our real life and all-day perception, but when watching a film we see it – that was Bazin's theory. That can, perhaps, explain the sentence. I think that when we are screening a film we have the impression of perceptive mastery, and it was precisely that impression of mastery that Bazin felt, and expressed, but in fact he was victim of a kind of lure, a deception, a delusion because this impression is the very mechanical, materialist result of the functioning of the objective, of the apparatus.

Rohdie: There is also a notion there of making strange too. There are film-makers that he would champion, like Bresson with those who use the cinema to make things strange.

Metz: Yes, but it was impossible not to support Bresson – obviously so important. Bazin was very, acutely intelligent and he was able to support film-makers very different from his point of view because he knew that they were important.

Routt: Is this 'casting a light on the illusion of perceptual mastery' part of the sadistic project of the film theoretician to which you refer once or twice, but do not really go into much detail about that aspect of film theory? You say it is a form of sadism, once or twice playfully, but perhaps it is worth saying more about it?

Metz: The theory is sadistic? Of course it is, yes (laughter). I mean by that when you analyse something, film or literature, you are pushed by the desire to take apart the object, of de-mounting, de-constructing the object – the word of Kristeva, ‘de-constructing’, is very expressive in this sadistic sense. It is not my idea – it is the idea of Melanie Klein – epistemophilia is linked to voyeurism, and voyeurism is linked to sadism. I think she is obviously right, in some sense, because in an imaginary way, to analyse an object is to destroy it – even if you do not destroy it physically, of course, but it means to destroy it phantasmatically.

Rohdie: What about playing with it?

Metz: Another way of dealing with it.

Rohdie: But would that be sadistic?

Metz: No, no, it would be the other drive, love drive, libido –

Rohdie: But it could also produce knowledge?

Metz: Oh yes, yes. But not exactly analyse, you know? To analyse is to take apart, to divide in two parts, to cut. If you think, what I mean is very simple. To analyse is to cut, to divide, to hurt, to symbolically destroy the object. Analysis is not the only form of knowledge, but it is a kind of sadism. The Greek word ‘analyse’ means to destroy, in Ancient Greek, to dissolve (verb: *Analuein*). You know in chemistry to analyse a given substance means, very precisely, to destroy it.

Flaus: Yes, in literature, Wordsworth said “we murder to dissect.”

So when you turned Bazin upside down, you were suggesting to us that Bazin’s claim that what we are getting there is the pleasure of being possessed by something greater than ourselves – that is the form of masochism. In other words, Bazin’s way of seeing what the cinema does to us is the pleasure of being taken over?

Metz: Yes, in reality. But what we feel is the imaginary pleasure of mastery – it could be an unconscious masochism. Masochism is linked with sadism, so it would be compatible, but the point is: the sadistic level is conscious while the masochistic level is unconscious – in this case. In other cases it is the opposite.

Martin: I would like to ask you, when you look back on *The Imaginary Signifier* whether there is a strong link – or the possibility of a link – between Lacan with Althusser, with certain kinds of Marxism and linguistics. Now, do you think that move is so strong? I am thinking about the critiques of, say, Lyotard, Deleuze, Guattari and Baudrillard. Do you think they have affected the intellectual climate in which you work?

Metz: Oh yes, inevitably.

Martin: Is the status of that marriage between psychoanalysis and Marxism so strong now? What position do you think it is in?

Metz: It was never very strong – it is an illusion of perspective. It was never so strong because it is difficult to link up everything, but it is true that this move has weakened now. Among other causes are the effects of these critiques that you mention, they were important.

Flaus: Not so much a marriage as an affaire?

Martin: Do you think this has greatly affected film criticism and theory?

Metz: Not especially in film criticism. It has a consequence – and a happy one – in film practice, in film-making. It has been responsible for the small beginning of experimental French cinema with the influence of Lyotard, and with people such as Claudine Eizykman and Guy Fihman. Experimental cinema was very undeveloped in France, and it really progressed with the influence of Lyotard – a very positive influence.

Flaus: How recent was that, please, we do not hear much about French experimental cinema at this distance?

Metz: Oh, very recent, within the last five years. Cinema has to manage with the demands of the film industry, which needs to have paying customers. It has to rely on the money circuit of the bank, the producer, the distributor, and so on, the most important of whom is the spectator, who pays to enter the cinema. If he has to pay, it means that he wishes to see the film, he has the desire to see the film, and so, here, you have another example of a meeting point, a crossing between the psychoanalytic problem and the social, economic problem.

Rohdie: How do you see those articulated? The social and economic situation, during the history of the cinema, would have altered considerably. For example, you have a period when there is no sound and another period when there is; a period when the construction of the cinema is basically artisanal, another when it is highly capitalised; you have another which goes through the crisis of the depression and another in which there are world wars and fascism. I am not sure how the narrative codes of the cinema, through, say, the twenties and thirties and fifties, could be articulated with socio-economic circumstances within this structure. You are right to say people are paying for their pleasure and desires. ...

Metz: It means that the affective, psychoanalytic machine is part of the film industry, that is very essential.

Rohdie: Yes, but it is still unclear how, beyond that, those socio-economic issues are articulated with that area that is ideological. That is the area of the position of the spectator and the pleasures which the spectator receives, in exchange for payment. When you talk about a socio-historical critique of the cinema in which it is necessary to concern oneself with economic, social and political structures, it is not clear how the articulation works – because in practice, though one asserts that the concepts are social and therefore subject to historical investigation and we use semiotics that involve linguistic and psychoanalytic representation, most analyses of the cinema in that area have not articulated their discussions of the spectator and questions of representation with those social, economic and class structures. Is it because it is impossible? Are the kinds of expertise required to make an analysis of economic structures at the same level of ideological structures, and to articulate them, are so vast no one can do it – or is it involved with something about the current analysis of the cinema, which genuflects towards the need for socio-historical critiques, but fails to practice them?

Metz: Yes, you know it is so. This lack of socio-economic study of the cinema, in certain works, is so by definition, because, as you said, we are not sociologists, we are not economists. I never pretend to study the sociology of the cinema. You have others who are sociologists of the cinema. You are correct, but it is so for the good reason that the articulation is extremely difficult to realize, intrinsically.

As to economics, there is something to add. Economics is science, real science that you need ten years to study. There are such studies of the

cinema, very good ones, Mercillon, for instance. You have sociologists, such as Sorlin in France.

Rohdie: Yes, but within your particular concerns, you can presumably set problems which you, yourself, cannot answer, for sociology or economics?

Metz: Yes, that's right.

Rohdie: What would those be? If, for example, I think of works within that area of semiotics that might genuflect towards the necessity for further articulations with other structures, if they want to explicate something within the cinema they always have their own terms, within a structure of ideology, for answering problems. They never pose any questions outside this infrastructural route. They never pose any questions to economic or social practices. It seems utterly self-sufficient. They say they need articulations elsewhere yet there seems to be no need for them, in many of the works from, roughly speaking, a semiotic point of view, because the answers and the problems mesh with each other. You don't need to ask questions about social practices outside the very specified realm of the cinema – they never enter into it.

If one says they ought to enter into it – and I am not pretending to be a sociologist or an economist – presumably one would be in a position to say that there are certain limits, there are certain problems that I cannot answer and yet need to be answered, need to be articulated with other structures – that does not seem to occur?

Metz: Yes, but you know, it's not my fault. We semiologists achieved some work in the last ten or twenty years, in France, while the sociologists of the cinema did not follow. So it's up to them – I cannot do it all by myself.

Rohdie: You might, for example, find over a long historical period in the cinema that narrative codes have remained relatively stable, and you seek the reasons for that stability. ...

Metz: Oh yes, I know the reason. The reason is that the film has had to reconquer by its own specific means of expression, the flexibility, the spatial-temporal flexibility, the ubiquity of the classical novel of the nineteenth century. It has to reconquer the favourite art of the bourgeoisie – that is clear. But semioticians have studied that, not the sociologists, they don't care. From this point on the sociologists have to take the relay, the historians

have to pick it up, because I have no competence to go further. In the absence of the necessary competences, the wish for articulations becomes wishful thinking.

Routt: To focus on one example, it would seem that French cinema before the war there was a certain currency of representation in the working class and it seems that after the New Wave that begins to disappear. A number of explanations might be offered; I would be interested, if you would care to hazard an explanation based on your topographical analysis of film pleasure, based on the notion of the richness of the diegesis based on the Id, and so on. I don't know whether I am pushing you into something too large?

Metz: No. My explanation would be – I have made no precise research, so it is only an opinion – that the objective achievement of the New Wave in France, without knowing it – unconsciously – was to conquer the bourgeoisie for film. Before the war the French bourgeoisie did not see many films – it was rather a populist entertainment – and so, as the diegesis became more subtle and rich the bourgeoisie became interested. The plots, the subject-matter of the films deeply changed – it was no longer a question of the working class, the Prévert, the Carné, they disappeared. Then there begin the stories on an executive who is divorced and who fell in love with a second woman, and so on. At the same time all the diegetic details became more subtle, more elaborate, so it was more appropriate to an educated audience. The audience has shifted.

Routt: What would have been the unpleasure of the pre-war audience for that kind of cinema, what would have been the source?

Metz: Ah, the 'false theatre' – it was a kind of cinema which remained very theatrical, but this impression works only for people who are used to going to the real theatre, that is the point. Whereas for the workers, for whom theatre is too expensive, they did not notice anything special – it was their theatre, and it was cinema.

Flaus: In a study of American drama, the observation, say with the rise of the tele-film there is a much narrower range of styles, the codes that are used are purer and simpler, the problem of the diegetic exercise is less pleasurable, to us anyway. The point where the cineaste would stop would be the point where he or she would say that economic pressures in the television industry require that budgets must be one-tenth of what might be spent as a theatre

release. As a tele-film, the budget would not only control the questions of casting, which reflects on the box-office, but that rehearsal times are much shorter, directors must use close ups and intercut between close ups instead of wide angle, long takes, and so on. The result of this narrowing down can be stated, by cineastes, to be a return to lower-budget tele-films, and it would be left there. The cineaste would say 'right, economists and socialist audience, find the data for us and put it together'. In my practice that would be a matter of economies – but I do not presume to go any further into that investigation.

Metz: Yes, I agree.

Rohdie: But you might start from the position of a loyal semiotician, and you pursue certain loyal semiotic projects, and you find that it does not answer your questions. You have to find out about other things because your desire to know a specific thing is not served by this collection of theories or concepts.

Flaus: That is where your first question came in, Sam, why is this not being done or is it impossible? Perhaps the gathering of the data is so diffuse.

Rohdie: I think it also has to do with the statement of what the problems are. The problems are stated in such a way that they are only soluble within the discipline, and the professional academic then says 'I can't go any further, this is the end of my expertise', rather than take a political position.

Metz: It is, it is.

Rohdie: But while your expertise might end, the problem might continue. You might have to say 'Well, I'm not going to be an expert any more, I'm going to take a risk'. Go somewhere where no one has been before because the problems require one going further, rather than taking a stand which is basically a particular kind of professionalism which says 'I don't know any more' but it is also saying 'I don't choose to know any more'.

Metz: It is not so, Sam, you know. In my life I have learned linguistics, semiotics, film theory and psychoanalysis and I can tell you that I am tired. I can't go further, it's the human capacity that has a limit.

Freiberg: But why chose psychoanalysis rather than say, sociology or economics?

Metz: Oh, that is the problem of human choice, you never can say 'why'. It is a deep choice made by the unconscious.

Flaus: Yes, why chose one lover rather than the other?

Metz: Yes, if I had chosen the opposite you would have asked me the opposite so ... (laughter).

Freiberg: I would like to continue this point, though, because at one stage early in your career you did try to specify what was essentially cinematic or filmic, what was the specific domain of film studies, and in doing that, it would exclude some of these other areas. In doing that you went on to concentrate – or validate, the area of psychoanalysis.

Metz: Oh no, I don't exclude anything. I say: 'For me, I study this and that, but other people can study other things'. In all life you have to make choices – but excuse me, I interrupted you?

Freiberg: Some of your previous comments about the French New Wave vis-à-vis the 'thirties' suggest that you do have some interest in sociology –

Metz: But of course, but interest and research, which takes thousands of hours, are two different things. Of course I have an interest, yes.

Freiberg: Do you think sociology has a significant contribution to make to film studies?

Metz: Oh yes.

Routt: It was said that one place where semiotics and psychoanalysis came together at the moment around the time of "Imaginary Signifier" appeared in English [1975], was that it provided the possibility of a theory of the subject in cinema. I was wondering if this was part of your conscious project in that paper, or whether it has been a by-product? The first time I read it, it seemed to be a traditional example of the cinema object in which the subject slowly becomes more paramount – one discovers one cannot discuss one without the other. I wondered how far you intended the theory of the subject in the cinema to be the central aim of this work – as it has been taken to be, in English and American circles?

Metz: Yes. This part of my book was conscious. It was a conscious project, because I was thinking about my former research and its lack of a theory of the subject – that had to be tackled. You have to deal with the problem of the subject, with the spectator; in my earlier research the problem of the spectator was *too* absent, it went too far. That was the beginning of my book and then the rest came less consciously.

Flaus: The Pleasure Principle stated in terms of the Reality Principle?

Metz: Yes, exactly.

Martin: I'd like to ask a question about a detail in your article, "The Imaginary Signifier," where you discuss the nature of identification in the cinema and their types. You distinguish between secondary types of identification that would include identification with a character and primary cinematic identification which is identification with the camera. It also seems to me you are arguing there is an identification with the film system as a whole – the filmic system.

Metz: That would be the primary one, part of the primary one,

Martin: If one considers the model of the spectator in the cinema, would one always talk about the spectator as in a position of identification? For example, if one thinks of a model of a game where one was a spectator, where you are following the game, would you say one identifies with the game or sport in order to follow it? If one does not, maybe one does not in relation to the cinema, and it is more like understanding a set of rules by which one can follow a set of discourses.

Metz: Yes, I agree. In your example it is quite possible that the spectator has no secondary identification with the football game – if he is not at all involved with 'footy', if he does not know the rules of the game. You have the precise conditions which can frequently make this impossible. Only the primary identification is inevitable.

Martin: Why would one want to call that identification, and what is one's definition of 'identification' under those circumstances?

Metz: Because you have to identify – I speak now of the primary one – your own personal look, your eyes, your watching, with the camera, with the

projector, with, finally, the whole cinematic apparatus. If you don't, you no longer understand what is going on. It is an objective condition of the subjective possibility of screening – is that clear?

Flaus: I think the problem is that we don't use the term 'identification' in that sense normally in English.

Metz: Ah you mean, perhaps, identification would be only with persons? It is not the French meaning of the term you know? 'Identification' means to confound oneself – or one's self-look or self-hearing with something, anything, a person, an object, an apparatus, a political regime. That makes it difficult to understand. I meant by that the fact that you are identifying your look with the cinematic apparatus – and most of all with the camera and projector.

Thompson: I am sure we would all like to thank Professor Metz for a most interesting and enlightening session, and, perhaps, continue to discuss some of these issues more informally. Thank you very much.

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