

11. Christian Metz: Interview

André Gaudreault

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Abstract

In this short interview, published in 1990, Christian Metz praises his mentor, Roland Barthes, but also points out the problems and issues associated with being a mentor. He also discusses the role of theory in studying film, names a number of Québécois filmmakers, and ends by discussing the importance of the International Association DOMITOR, which studies early cinema and held its first conference in 1990.

Keywords: Christian Metz, film theory, Roland Barthes, DOMITOR

‘Christian Metz. Entretien’. André Gaudreault. 24 *Images* 49 (1990), pp. 63–65. Reprinted with the permission of André Gaudreault. Translated by Warren Buckland.

Since the late sixties, Christian Metz has enriched film theory with major works including *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, *Langage et cinéma*, and *Le signifiant imaginaire*. From 7 to 13 June [1990], a conference on early cinema will be held in the city of Quebec, thanks to which Christian Metz will make his first trip to the city.¹ To mark this long overdue visit, we publish this interview with Metz by theorist André Gaudreault (*Du Littéraire au Filmique*²), conducted during another conference held in June 1989 in France, focused entirely on the work of Metz.

24 *Images*: You mentioned in your closing remarks at the end of the Cerisy-la-Salle conference that Roland Barthes was your mentor. What was your relationship with Barthes? Moreover, what do you think now that this

relationship is reversed, where you are the mentor of other researchers? And what do you think, in general, of this famous relation to 'the mentor'?

Christian Metz: A multi-part question. ... Barthes was indeed my mentor, and he was also a friend. So it is a little complicated. Yet, in practice, it was very simple. He was very kind and extremely considerate with everyone, a famous man with the complete beginner, as I was when he recruited me. I received only good things from him, great loyalty in friendship, indispensable support for my career. My memory of him, even today, is vivid. When he died in 1980, I had a nervous breakdown that led me to the hospital.

Now, the reversal of which you speak, in which I am, in my turn, the mentor. I will not deny that it has pleasant aspects. But that is obvious. What is generally less well known are the very substantial downsides. First, the increase in demand with all its consequences (overwork, mail, etc.); also, the mental stress: some people turn you into a Superman, a burdensome image that is not pleasant (the exaggerated praise sounds like mockery); and then we are called to intervene at any moment, we must coddle everyone, etc. Second disadvantage: the position one occupies subjects us to attack without provocation, by third parties who simply do not tolerate our fame, or are not happy, etc., and do not shrink, on occasion, from insults or lying. It does not happen to me often, but it is very unpleasant.

More generally, I would say that there are two different things. 'Being' or not being a mentor, that is for others to say, it is not up to us. But *to play* the mentor, to adopt an authoritarian attitude, etc., that depends on you, no one is forcing you. If we do it, then we can be held responsible. I find this type of conduct detestable.

24 Images: You have answered two parts of my question. There was a third. I have not sufficiently stressed your student relationship to Barthes, and your situation as mentor in regards to your own students. ...

Metz: These two types of relationships are not comparable. Barthes was my teacher in an important but limited area: how to behave in the day to day part of the job, in the workplace, how to conduct a seminar, talk to students, to support a hypothesis, instill confidence in anxious young researchers, etc. But he was not my teacher with regard to research, except in terms of some very general methods (or, rather, attitudes of mind), which were very valuable. The only thing that really interested him was literature. He had little taste for cinema. He knew it better than people said he did, but not as a specialist. This did not prevent him from considering it an

important area requiring investigation. He was waiting for someone who could take it on. That is how I started in 1963, working with the small group preparing the *Communications* journal's fourth issue.³ He often repeated in meetings or thesis defenses that, apart from the literary field, which was favored because of its established tradition, film semiology was the only semiology that really exists; it forms a 'field' in which people meet, complement each other, criticize, have a certain degree of autonomy, etc. But ultimately, he taught me, above all, the importance of 'friendliness' and civility in working relationships, and their importance, too, for the research itself, which is an intellectual activity whose conditions of possibility are non-intellectual. Controversy, bitterness, and arrogance can derail the work itself.

24 Images: You have influenced people, but how have you influenced the development of theory itself? Your own, of course, but also future scholars?

Metz: In the field of cinema, which is traditionally a bit insular (or peripheral), it is true that I have some influence. I can see it in invitations I receive to distant conferences, in the fact that my texts have been translated into 21 languages, etc. Raymond Bellour explained this influence at the beginning of the [Cerisy-la-Salle] conference better than I can myself.⁴ I will summarize approximately what he said: the important thing is not the theses I supported (film has no double articulation, it has no equivalent; enunciation is impersonal rather than anthropomorphic, etc.), because those who support the opposite view belong to the same world as me, to a world in which such questions are asked. And conversely, for a traditional film critic, double articulation is neither present, nor absent, it does not exist as an issue. In short, my 'influence' is not in what I said, but the fact that I was the first to speak in a certain way, which also allows others to argue with me. I placed discourse on cinema, which was still 'under-developed' despite some brilliant exceptions (Eisenstein, Bazin, etc.), in the sphere of the social sciences, as well as the humanities (which differ less than is claimed), but also within an approach constantly focused on precision, rigor, and level-headed thinking. There is nothing else, but that is enough. Of course, one can say that I brought together linguistics and psychoanalysis. But they were only catalysts for renewing discourse, the vectors of culture.

24 Images: For you, what is the future of film studies? Do you think it will decline or grow?

Metz: Grow, probably (I speak of research), since it has constantly done so for several years, and it is still a 'young' discipline that has not yet reached its zenith. It follows that new areas of film theory, created pretty much everywhere in universities, will produce researchers. Of course, this says nothing about the quality of the work, or its orientation. We see emerging today major strands mobilizing many people, narrato-enunciative pragmatics, the construction of a theoretical history, early cinema, but I think, frankly, we cannot draw any conclusions about the future.

24 Images: Now, a question that is perhaps impossible to answer: In your opinion, what is the significance of film studies for the cinema?

Metz: My answer is simple: no significance. Cinema can work very well without us; it has done so for decades, and continues to do so in 99 cases out of a hundred. We are theoreticians, which implies a way of thinking and a type of culture that is foreign to the world of cinema, which often instinctively hates theory, without understanding it. It is almost a problem of elitism. I never believed in the clichés about the enrichment of filmmaking by theory, etc. Of course, when I look back at the conference, I see that a filmmaker such as Alain Bergala, who has long followed my seminar and Barthes' seminar, etc., 'placed' in his filmmaking many things that emerged from those seminars. But what do we make of all the Bergalas, who are marginal figures in the cinematic institution, which is a big business, with stars, 'power', etc.?

24 Images: So, the purpose of film studies lies elsewhere.

Metz: It is located in knowing, in analyzing, in the effort to understand how things work. (To speak pretentiously: it is located 'in the realm of knowledge'.) When studying Greek mythology, its purpose is even less, for studying it only serves to know Greek mythology itself. It is not true that all disciplines can be 'applied', and it is pure demagoguery to say so. Some can be, like chemistry with medicine, and others not, such as filmology (and many others: philosophy, literary history, music, etc.). We must demand the right to disinterested studies; that is to say, to refuse mind-numbing technocracy.

24 Images: You will soon come to Quebec for the first time. Is there something in Québécois culture that interests you in particular? Or in Québécois cinema?

Metz: I am not really in a position to reply. I know the same Québécois filmmakers everyone knows: [Michel] Brault, [Pierre] Perrault, Claude Jutra, Gilles Groulx, Denys Arcand, Gilles Carle, the French speaking part of the ONF [NFB: National Film Board of Canada], etc.

24 Images: Which Québécois films have you seen?

Metz: Many, inevitably, during the 42 years I have been going to the cinema. But recently, *Un pays sans bon sens!* [Perrault, 1970] (I missed it on its initial release), and also *Le déclin de l'empire américain* [Arcand, 1986]. I loved Perrault's film for its way of intermingling fiction and documentary, and also for its humor. For example: the failed maturation of the small Québécois mice, the Québécois people's 'genetic gift of the gab', etc. There is also a lot of poetry: toward the beginning of the film, when the biologist and a friend go to see the ducks that populate a protected area in their thousands, at the seaside (or St. Lawrence?), and they evoke their childhood, their memories tied to this place. Images of snow, and of large ships slowly moving up river, Jacques Cartier's journal; all this is beautiful. The film is also very joyous, and made me laugh throughout. The mosaic construction worked well, and is very convincing. As for Denys Arcand's film, which wavers between a live theater act and a brilliant creation, it is nevertheless an irreplaceable record (even if it exaggerates), a record that is both intentional and unintentional on many things: the chatterbox, intellectuals, sex, relations between men and women, between teachers and students, remnants of fashionable modernity (in this case Susan Sontag, [Fernand] Braudel and [Barthes'] *A Lover's Discourse*). We would appreciate a little more tact, but the guy has a real force. On the other hand, the film awakens (for the French) a fairly common misunderstanding. We are shown obvious errors such as a university professor who has a property worth (back home) three or four million francs; his French counterpart earns 20,000 francs per month. The Québécois debate (ten or fifteen years ago) was freely self-deprecating, whereas for us, it is a rich country, while 'English' Canada (as Perrault said amusingly, because they are not English but Canadians) is even richer. Obviously, I know that this is relative: my Argentine friends think we are rich in France, and rightly so. ...

24 Images: The main reason for your trip to Quebec in 1990 is your participation in the DOMITOR symposium on 'Early Cinema and Religious Institutions'. What do you expect from this conference?

Metz: I think the DOMITOR initiative is very important. I was the first, as I learned later, to submit my application form and my membership dues, at the founding of the Association. Early cinema, at one time called 'primitive', was rarely studied, and mostly studied badly. The factual data, the basic information available to us thanks to inspired enthusiasts such as [Georges] Sadoul, [Jean] Mitry and others, are very often false. The DOMITOR project will enable us to learn more about early cinema, and also about the cinema itself, because early cinema marks for the first time the birth, genesis, and self-definition of an art. This is the only time where film history has merged with theory; you have written an article to explain this merging (thinking back, I also said something rather similar at the beginning of my article on the impression of reality in the cinema⁵). The beginning of an art, or a means of expression, is the time where theory is created in conjunction with its history; thereafter, both begin to separate.

As for the final paper that has been asked of me for this conference, I will do it from my perspective, that of a theoretician and semiologist. I am not a specialist of early cinema, which is a genuine profession that cannot be improvised; it is historical scholarly work based on the numerous and detailed viewing of films. To me, who is outside of this field and who has no desire to feign an imaginary competence in it, what is interesting is to say to early cinema specialists what they bring to *other* areas of research; for example, to the issue of the shot – a single shot film or a film with several shots where each functions autonomously, etc. Also, what do they bring to the theory of montage, editing, and narrative? That is what I plan to do after watching the films. I am very pleased to participate in this large gathering.

NOTE: The International Association DOMITOR aims to lay the foundations for genuine cooperation between researchers in order to promote the development of a rigorous and documented historical understanding of early cinema. The symposium entitled 'An Invention of the Devil: Moving Pious Pictures' will be held at the Museum of Civilization in Quebec June 7 to 13 [1990].

Notes

1. [However, in the end Metz was unable to attend the DOMITOR conference or visit Canada. Trans.]
2. [André Gaudreault, *Du littéraire au filmique. Système du récit*, Paris/Québec, Méridiens Klincksieck/Presses de l'Université Laval, 1988.]

3. ['Recherches Sémiologiques', *Communications*, 4, (Paris: Seuil, 1964)].
4. [Raymond Bellour, 'Le cinéma et ...', *Iris* 10 (1990): 15–35; 'Cinema and ...', *Semiotica* 112, 1 / 2 (1996), pp. 207–29.]
5. [Christian Metz, 'On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema' in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 3–15.]

