

12. Twenty-Five Years Later: An Assessment. An Ethics of Semiology

Interview with Christian Metz by André Gardies

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Abstract

In this interview published in 1991, Christian Metz looks at the last quarter-century of a discipline that he made a significant contribution to founding. He successively examines the role of linguistics (which is not to be confused with film semiology), the reactions raised by the emergence of semiology, the relationship between cinema and cinéphilie, and the question of research and teaching. He then distinguishes three groups of researchers in semiology, only one of which is directly descended from semiology, before speaking about his current work and paying homage to his only mentor, Roland Barthes.

Keywords: Christian Metz, film theory, semiology, cinéphilie, Roland Barthes

André Gardies, '(Vingt-cinq ans après. Un bilan). Une éthique de la sémiologie. Entretien avec Christian Metz'. *CinémAction* 58 (1991), pp. 76–94. Published with the permission of André Gardies. Translated by Daniel Fairfax.

André Gardies: 25 years later, how do you, as a founder of the field, perceive the evolution of film semiology, and how do you situate your own work with respect to this development?

Christian Metz: You have just used the word 'founder', but I would prefer to say 'initiator', because there existed, well before my intervention, approaches

which, although they were not semiological, manifested rather similar preoccupations. I am thinking of the Russian formalists, Eisenstein, etc.

But I will answer your question. It seems to me that the issue of film semiology, even today, after 25 years, is sometimes poorly posed from the beginning. It is often understood as, or purported to be understood as, an application of linguistics; this then becomes a point of contention, a kind of blockage that holds some people back. It is also a flagrant distortion of the truth. Applying linguistics to the cinema would entail treating it as a language system [*langue*] or as analogous to a language system. However, my first in-depth article, from 1964, generally considered as the point of departure for my work,¹ said exactly the opposite: the cinema is not a language system (whence the title of the article). So we are not concerned with 'application' but with *taking into consideration* some elementary concepts like 'syntagma', 'code', etc. These concepts, incidentally, are for the most part not even truly derived from linguistics (I will come back to this point). Hence, notions like 'prefix', 'declension', 'optative', and many more, specific to language systems and them alone, have never been invoked in my studies of the cinema. I have only retained the most general concepts, *and consequently the least linguistic concepts*. This is what is sometimes poorly understood.

Gardies: But do semiologists of written or oral texts not encounter the same problem in discursive analysis? Was there not, at a given point in time, a conjunction of problematics, which, while referring to different fields, have ended up somewhat abusively becoming confused with each other in their common attempt to escape the linguistics of the sign?

Metz: I agree. The semiologists of the novel, for example, or of speech, were in an even more difficult position than we were, because the materiality of their object was linguistic in nature. The Soviet researchers were clearer on this point, with their distinction between 'a primary modeling system' (= the idiom) and secondary modelling systems like mythology, folklore (in fairy tales), the rules of literary genres, etc. Every poem, for example, is inscribed in a given language, but superposes on it an additional structural level. This bipartition is a little brutal, a little simple, but it was useful in its time, it helped us to escape from the minor awkwardness that you evoked.

On the same topic, I would like to once again say that the expression *cinematic language* is neither my own invention, nor that of any other semiologist. It comes from film critics and journalists, who also speak, in the same way, of 'musical language', 'visual language', etc. I found the word in critical articles from the 1920s, and it subsequently became widespread

(it was the title, for example, of books by both Marcel Martin and François Chevassu). As for the 'arm-twisting [*forcing*]' on the term *language*, which some people attribute to me, it was provided by the film vocabulary around me and before my time.

I tackled the problem from the other side of the coin: because everybody used this formula, which links film and articulated language, I wanted to get to the bottom of the metaphor (the expression comes from Roland Barthes, when he commented on my undertaking), to measure its exact importance, to *explain* how the cinema resembled language and how they were different. And the differences, of course, were far more prevalent. But to know how and to what extent they differed, we need a minimum of linguistic investigation. We cannot compare two things by remaining ignorant about one of them.

Linguistics: A Stubborn Misunderstanding

Gardies: Was there not, at the same time, another form of pressure: the pressure exerted by the cinema's normative approaches, such as attempts to establish 'cinematic grammars'?

Metz: Certainly. If we restrict ourselves to France, there was Berthomieu's 'grammar', Robert Bataille's, and still others. But I cannot say that they exerted any pressure on my project. They were a little puerile, they never had much credibility.

Gardies: Indeed, but in several manuals on film language from the 1950s and 1960s we regularly find affirmations like: 'The low-angle shot expresses domination', 'The close-up translates the feelings of the characters', etc. This kind of norm, which tends to fix meaning, nonetheless belonged to the language of the era.

Metz: In this sense, yes, I was caught between a rock and a hard place. On one side there was the spontaneous, libertarian ideology of certain filmmakers and critics, for whom creation did not allow any constraints, organization, or plans (and who even became irritated at the activity of analysis itself, regardless of its content). On the other side, a false linguistics, which sought the cinematic equivalent of the imperfect subjunctive, and which closely followed the model of scholastic normative grammars, arbitrarily referring to a tiny number of languages (French, Latin...), and alien to modern research in linguistic science.

I thus found myself the target of reproaches for 'transplanting linguistics'. This may have been abetted by a material circumstance that produced the misunderstanding: shortly after my first publications, in 1966 (and up to 1972), the *École des Hautes Etudes*, my 'employer', asked me to deliver a course in general linguistics. This course, which was also called 'linguistics for non-linguists', responded to a strong demand at the time (which today has diminished, as you know) from students and researchers in other disciplines, and our institution at the time only had very 'specialized' linguistic seminars (Chinese syntax, etc.).

I certainly do not make any mystery of my intense interest in linguistics, but you can love something without 'applying' it to something else. When I speak of the cinema, linguistics becomes, in my view, a comparative tool, a kind of *support*, nothing more (and nothing less, for in this very limited role, it is irreplaceable). Through the search for common features and, above all, differences, it clearly illuminates certain aspects of the cinema (I insist on saying 'certain aspects': one cannot speak about everything at once).

Gardies: I believe that the strength of your work lies in the fact that you were able to choose the key concepts, the most productive concepts, on which a theoretical construction was possible. You chose the most pertinent concepts.

Metz: It is not for me to say, since then I would be both judge and defendant. What I can discuss, because it is not self-evident, is the great parsimony of my linguistic harvest. Linguistics is a rich, pluralist, respected science; it wields hundreds of concepts. And yet, I have only retained a handful of them, while the researchers who followed me added only another handful; we only have to look at the number of entries figuring in the excellent lexicon in your special issue.²

This little toolkit is rather modest if you think about what other disciplines of modern research assemble. I understand that people could take fright at it, but this does not mean that we are more ridiculous, merely that we are not familiar with 'scientific' approaches in general.

Furthermore, there is the slippage I just spoke about: notions like 'paradigm/syntagma', 'text/system', 'code/message', 'diegesis', etc., are of interest to general semiology, that is, the sum total of signifying phenomena. There is nothing especially linguistic about them.

But linguists (and others) have often provided definitions of them: this is the source of potential confusion, even though linguists themselves declared that some of their concepts, far exceeding the scope of studying

language systems, were not linguistic: this, for example, is the explicit, unchanging attitude of Hjelmslev (and it is already present in Saussure).

Now, this changes everything, because although it is understandable that people have wanted, so to speak, to 'distance' the cinema from the sphere of language systems, I do not see how it can be excluded from the sphere of semiology, because it is quite obvious that the cinema is a means for transmitting – and above all creating – meanings.

Gardies: Was the fundamental questioning of the sign also a source of confusion? The sign was on the frontline during the first battles waged by film semiology. It was vociferously attacked, was it not? And yet, your work has convincingly shown that meaning in the cinema was not only the work of the sign.

Metz: I do not know if I have shown this *well*, but my voice has become hoarse saying it. I already did so in my 1964 article, with the assertion that the cinema is not a system of signs. Then, in 1971, also an early date, in *Language and Cinema*, with the 'critique' of the sign and the refusal to prejudge the size of the units, their form, the very presence of a fixed signified. I have not changed my outlook since then. I could summarize my work, on this point, with a quip: "Signification does not signify the sign."

Gardies: It would be interesting to undertake historical research on how such a distortion came about: what led to this narrow-minded reading of your work?

Metz: Sometimes the reading is worse than narrow-minded: it can happen that people have read the *opposite* of what I wrote, notably on the question you raised: the book patiently explains that there is no such thing as a [filmic] sign, and yet I am reproached for having said that there are signs; if needed, they will show you very seriously that there is no such thing...

Nonetheless, this blindness was not universal, for if semiology has sometimes been poorly understood, it also won over numerous adherents almost immediately...

Gardies: Yes, but since the misunderstanding, at a certain point in time, was so widespread, it is not simply a case of inadequate interpretation. Were there other events at play?

Metz: I have the beginning of an answer, or rather several beginnings. Firstly, to go back to the misunderstanding: it was not as generalized as you say;

I feel you are exaggerating its scale a little. Of course, my writings were the target of some bitter attacks [*boulets rouges*], but this is the fate of any well-known writer, it is almost automatic, and largely independent of the content. It is a social mechanism. On the other hand, the confusion you spoke about did not arise among scholars, nor did it surface in journals like *Image et Son* (as it was called at the time) or *Cahiers du Cinéma*, etc.

That said, I agree that the lack of understanding was very common. There are malevolent people everywhere. There are also fools, who do not understand what they are reading, or who get everything muddled up. These factors are often forgotten due to their triviality, but this does not prevent them from being pertinent, for us just as for anybody else. To this extent, it is the very success of semiology among certain people that prompted attacks from others (a classic phenomenon), and which has also attracted those who, not being well prepared, choked on it – like a potion without much of a magical effect – whether this was with an unruly, frightened sympathy, or with the unruly feeling that it was a *must*. My ‘emergence’ [*apparition*] (!) provoked enthusiastic and animated support, which left me stunned. My work generated a feverish hope (= finally, we will understand *everything* about the cinema, now that we have a miracle-gadget!), and sometimes even a genuinely ‘groupie’-style behavior – which was quite embarrassing if you are not inclined to play the part of an Elvis Presley. This is the inverse aspect of your question, but it refers back to the same reality, which is the immaturity of the field.

Nevertheless, this is not the main thing. I believe that *within* the semiological approach there is something profoundly unusual, something that confronts old habits. When we speak of studying the cinema, everybody thinks of the biographical details of the great filmmakers, of the content of films and their plots, of a knowledge about technical credits and dates, of the evolution of the film industry, etc., but nobody gives a second thought to the mechanism of signification, without which all the rest would not even exist. It is just like everyday life: we are concerned with what people say, but not the machine, with its rules and inventiveness, which allows them to speak. Psychologically, socially, ideologically, the metalinguistic attitude (the attention paid to the *how* of signification rather than its concrete content) is always deviant, a little transgressive, and spontaneously unpopular. It sets you apart, makes you appear to be something of a fanatic. If you add to this the ‘technical’ difficulty (or austerity?) of semiological writing, and taking into account the almost elusive ‘flimsiness’ of the object of study (that is, meaning), rather than focus on the apparent growth of linguistics, then I think you can understand that film semiology has only been understood by a fraction of the public. In any case, this is how things are for all theoretical movements in their initial moments.

A Demand for Rigor and Precision

Gardies: Yes, of course, people could have not listened to you, but they did listen to you, because you often had your own words thrown back at you, but in a deformed way...

Metz: I see in this deformation a kind of minor hallucination. People project onto your text what they have in their own heads, they make you say what they would have said in your stead, or even, depending on their emotional disposition, what they would hate to hear. Furthermore, you should not forget that the reader of a book simultaneously 'reads' the other books of the same type – namely, all those books that were grouped into the same basket called 'structuralism'. Even if I did say (without being the only one to do so) that the sign was not the most important issue, the whole debate at the time revolved around the sign, the word itself kept on recurring, and therefore that is all that the inattentive reader would recall, without specifically remembering whether it was discussed in a positive or negative light.

This is the consequence – a 'warped' consequence, but a consequence all the same – of what we spoke about at the beginning of this interview, that is, the *attention* paid to the contribution of linguistics. This was a common trait of the era, of course, but all systems of ideas are inscribed in history. By means of this new orientation, semiology targeted something else, something that rather resembled (from afar) what Cohen-Séat's filmology had earlier attempted to achieve – but without truly attaining its goals, and using a method that I find both admirable and yet too scientific.

As far as this group of precursors is concerned, I would like to honor the memory of Ed Lowry, an American scholar who died at a very young age, around thirty, a delicate, sensitive man, to whom we owe the only serious book dedicated to French filmology, a remarkably researched and intelligent work.³

Semiology, therefore, through this refocusing of attention, demanded of film theory precision, culture, rigor, and nuanced restraint – in short, sophistication; from which, on the whole, it was very remote, despite the André Bazins, Jean Mitrys, Edgar Morins, some journal articles, etc., which pointed the way, and from which I have drawn sustenance. I wanted film texts to have the maturity to link up with the whole of contemporary scholarship in the other sectors of what we somewhat abusively call the 'human sciences', or the 'social sciences'. What seems abusive to me is the word *science*, for we are not (or not yet?) at that stage, and I have never

claimed I was either. I would simply speak of serious, or rigorous, research. This is already a lot, if you can imagine how provincial and unenlightened a lot of film writing was, how it was marooned on an autarkic island that the major currents of thought avoided.

Gardies: Was it not precisely in the wake of all this that the fundamental project was initiated, which was to constitute the cinema as an object of study? That is, to free it from an empirical, pragmatic vision, dominated by journalistic discourse, for example? As far as your own approach is concerned, when reviving for your own purposes the distinction introduced by Cohen-Séat between the filmic fact and the cinematic fact, in order to question this distinction, is there not the declaration to constitute the cinema as a scientific object, so as, in effect, to articulate a discourse on it, at the same as this discourse constitutes it as an object?

Metz: I would not have thought of formulating it the way you do, in particular in the last thing you say, but hearing you out, I agree. As for the word 'scientific' (I will come back to this), you use it in a provisional sense, in order to designate a goal, rather than a result that has been happily attained. In that sense, I could also use the term, and indeed I occasionally do, even if only to distinguish analytic essays from literary works. What exasperates me is the use of the word 'scientific' in an exclusive, totalizing sense, in order to pronounce excommunications.

Conversely, I will latch onto your allusion to journalism in order to express an opinion which, coming from me, may well shock those readers who are beholden to stereotypes: namely, that journalistic discourse, which on a concrete level very often turns out to be mediocre, is in no way despicable in and of itself (there is also, indeed, plenty of mediocre theoretical writing). The 'format' of the newspaper, its rhythm, the *speed* that it induces, can give rise to remarkable writing (I am obviously thinking of Serge Daney here) and texts that most scholars, not least myself, would be incapable of writing. To put it simply, journalism and scholarly writing are two different things, two discursive categories that do not have the same demands. Each has its own specific utility (I already said this in 1964, when speaking about newspaper film reviews). Among my friends, a few scholars are also good journalists, or have the potential to be, including: Raymond Bellour, Jean-Louis Leutrat, Dominique Noguez, Francis Vanoye – perhaps I am forgetting one or two others, but not a large number.

The Reproach of Zealotry

Gardies: In sum, under the common appellation 'cinema', we speak about different things. Semiology should thus constitute its cinema-object.

Metz: Absolutely. But I insist on repeating my wariness toward hierarchies that consider genres *en bloc*, like 'journalism' or 'science'. Every category has its good and bad side, which is a different problem entirely...

Gardies: Not totally, perhaps, because semiology has been so frequently accused of zealotry, of wanting to monopolize film discourse while despising other approaches, that this fact needs to be questioned. I believe there is also a kind of misunderstanding. You, yourself, willingly recommend moderation and courtesy; you have never, whether in your public speeches or in your written work, formulated a phrase that could be mistaken for zealotry. So it may be shocking that semiology has been put on trial like this. In your opinion, is there any justification for this? Apart from yourself, were there any attempts at zealotry, or was this the tenor of the period? Here, I am thinking about the militant discourses published in the journal *Cinéthique*.

Metz: I do not think that we should exaggerate the importance of this 'trial'. Reactions were divided, they varied widely, and changed all the time. *Cinéthique*, for example (because you bring it up), considered me to be the only worthwhile scholar in the field, but at the same time vigorously critiqued me on the political level.

Nonetheless, it is true that semiology was often accused of zealotry. You ask me why. Well, an important element to my answer would be that I do not know everything that is done and said in the name of semiology, and perhaps even in my own name. There are 'zealots' in every movement. It can be supposed without much risk of error that during the period that semiology was in fashion, it must have given rise, just as other theories do, to little local chieftains who spoke ineptly. The initiator of a movement is often less excited, more relativist, because he has found a certain appeasement in advance, by the very act of 'creating' the theory. All the same, it is quite true that I have never attacked anybody. I find polemics sterile, particularly when they become violent. When I was attacked, even insulted in some cases, I never replied. This is a principle, as well as being an advantage of my position. And when I lost my temper in public (this happened to me three times), I immediately regretted it and gave my apologies.

To return to what astonished you, there is another element that could explain it, which I have directly borrowed from Roland Barthes. It is an idea that courses through his entire œuvre, the idea that every position that is even a little bit intellectual or intellectualist, every objectifying position that is detached from 'lived experience', provokes violent reactions expressing a kind of populism [*poujadisme*], or even, to use the Italian, a kind of *qualunquismo*. We are reproached for not speaking like the ordinary man (not, of course, Jean Louis Schefer's ordinary man⁴), of not speaking 'just like everybody else'. This is a profoundly demagogic position. It forgets that the virtuous indignation of the ordinary man on the street magically disappears when confronted with the extravagant gibberish of sports reporters, whom nobody would dream of accusing of 'jargon', or even when they come across the hundreds of rare words that blacksmiths and carpenters use to designate their tools and techniques.

The Discreet Passion for the Cinema

Gardies: This specialized vocabulary is, in fact, linked to a spirit of rigor and precision. I think that a number of scholars working close to you, or even at a distance from you, owe a lot to this essential quality: the demand for rigor and precision. This is where you have been completely successful.

Metz: Well, it is not for me to judge whether I have been successful, but it is true that they are the values I believe in. As for the result, I would not, for my part, employ the word 'completely'. Perhaps I have succeeded in infusing a certain number of film scholars with this taste for precision, and this number may not be negligible – far from it – but it is not immense. There are, of course, important extensions of my work in other countries (my texts have been translated into 21 languages), but in each country they reach a rather specific public...

Gardies: Perhaps it is the fate of research groups to be numerically quite small...

Metz: I agree. What I said was an observation, not a regret. I cannot see myself whipping crowds up into a frenzy...

Gardies: What is more, your influence in film studies has, I feel, far exceeded the sphere of the semiologists. I think that, through your exemplary concern

for rigor, through your manner of observing the film-object, describing it, taking stock of it, constituting it, you put lazy researchers in their place, so to speak.

Metz: As far as my indirect influence on other tendencies is concerned, I would like, if you will, to return to this matter at a more leisurely moment, because your insistence on the idea of rigor makes me recall, through the association of ideas, what I would call an exemplary lack of rigor, to which I have occasionally fallen victim: from time to time, I have been accused (by Louis Seguin, for example, with a somewhat inexplicable excess, because he does not know me) of never having watched a film. This is, of course, because I cite the titles of very few films in my writings. But this gives no indication whatsoever of the films that I have seen or not seen. And yet the advocates of this type of argument cannot seem to fathom that, when I see a film (I see about four per week and, right after the screening, I take lengthy notes on each one), I do not feel the need to tell everyone who cares to listen, to declare myself a cinéophile, to spout out lists of credit sequences. This is one of the petty infantilisms proper to the film world: actually doing something counts for little, you have to sing it from the rooftops.

Well, since it must be said, this interview provides me with an excellent occasion to say it: yes, I am a cinéophile, and I even have a certain MacMahonian bent that my reason tempers with great effort. Yes, I was raised on film noir. Yes, I am one of those who melt at the sight of Humphrey Bogart, who never tires of Welles, Fellini, Stroheim, Murnau, Ozu, Dreyer, etc. Yes, I love films, many films, and it took me 25 years to understand that I had wronged myself, in the eyes of some, by remaining silent on this matter through what was for me a simple concern for discretion and restraint. One should not hurl one's tastes and actions in the faces of other people. Can you imagine Genette declaring 'I love Proust'? And yet...

Gardies: I believe that what is not perceived is that semiologists, due to the nature of their work, generally only speak about a limited number of films, or even film sequences. But in order to do this, they must have already seen a large number of other films, precisely in order to nurture their painstaking work. Critics, by contrast, because their primary function is to inform the reader, must refer to the vast 'corpus' of current releases. The two objectives are different.

Metz: Yes, we are in agreement on this. I would add that, when a critic has talent, he can, when informing the reader, do more than just inform...

Influence on Criticism

Gardies: Absolutely. Given that the objective of semiology is to better understand both the cinematic fact and the filmic fact, it might be surprising that it has not had more of an influence on criticism. Is this not the sign of a partial failure?

Metz: On this point, I would go even further than you: semiology has had no influence on criticism, except, as I said earlier, for *Cahiers du Cinéma* during a certain period, and in a more intermittent, more superficial fashion, in some other journals: *Image et Son*, *Jump Cut*, *Wide Angle* ... (I am leaving to one side, of course, the theoretical journals like *Screen*, *Camera Obscura*, and so on, where my influence has, on the contrary, been considerable). You asked me whether, as far as criticism is concerned, this is a failure. Of course, we can always say that the lack of influence is a failure. In one sense, this is true. But personally (and in opposition to, I should clarify, some of my close friends), I do not feel it to be a failure. I am not affected by it in the slightest. In effect, everything depends on the goal we assign to semiology, and more precisely on the *social surface* that we wish to see it occupy. I have little concern for proselytism, and I spontaneously share the radical views of Lévi-Strauss, his skepticism toward applied sciences, and the very project of applying them: the 'human sciences', he effectively said, do not need to be applied, the objectives of knowledge, analysis and intellectual curiosity alone suffice. In short, to give a more direct answer to your question, I do not think it is indispensable for film criticism, which has its own requirements, to be semiologized, or even that anything whatsoever should be semiologized, apart from semiology.

Gardies: All the same, with the institutionalization of film, which has become an object of learning, has semiology unavoidably entered the era of its application?

Metz: We have not understood each other properly. Firstly, teaching. Film does not necessarily (or not only) mean teaching film semiology, it also means teaching film history, the major rules of the film industry, etc. Secondly, the didactic activity you allude to – notably, analyzing films for students with the aid of video cassettes – does not constitute an 'application', it is the transmission of knowledge itself.

Gardies: Precisely, is it not at the level of discourse that this problem presents itself? Of semiology itself, as a discourse? In sum, is it perhaps more a fundamental question of ideology, rather than the application of techniques? Is there an ideology of semiology? Does it secrete its own ideology? In other terms, does it adopt a fundamental stance in relation to the cinema-object and the film-object?

Metz: On a question as 'profound' and complex as that of the *stance*, which would require a whole interview on its own, I believe that every semiologist has their own answer. I can only speak in my personal name. I started out in phenomenology, which was triumphant at the time of the Libération, when I was studying, and to which I remain very attached. In one of my articles, 'Le perçu et le nommé',⁵ I have tried to show that phenomenology is the necessary, prerequisite condition for all of semiology (Greimas already said this before I did). In my *khâgne*,⁶ Jean Beaufret was my philosophy professor. When André Bazin presented films in the ciné-clubs of the Latin Quarter, I went to listen to him with passion. Later, Mikel Dufrenne published my first book. Dufrenne, who I often quote, is a great aesthetic theorist, and he is a man whose generosity of spirit and openness toward others are exceptional. In the same book series, he also published Lyotard's first book, and yet Lyotard, too, used phenomenology as a point of departure to go in other directions (in that book, he found the exact words to pay homage to Dufrenne, and I have taken advantage of the circumstance to associate myself with it).

In short, I started out in phenomenology [*départ dans la phéno*] (this would make a great title for a crime novel!). And as far as films are concerned, everything began (as an adolescent, of course) with an intense, insatiable cinéphilie. In the provincial town where I grew up, I was part of the group that ran the youth ciné-club, then I co-organized with a friend the *khâgne* ciné-club at the Lycée Henri IV, in Paris. Then, with a different friend, I ran the ciné-club at the Rue d'Ulm campus of the École normale supérieure. Subsequently, for a few months in 1955–1956, I worked for Georges Sadoul, who was looking for a sort of secretary and possible successor (our temperaments, which were at odds with each other, soon ended this attempted collaboration, but without any conflict between us).

But all these activities did not provide me with a profession. At the same time, I was pursuing classical studies, in the style of the time (I did my *agrégation de lettres*, etc.). For several long years, I simultaneously 'lived' in both of these two universes. They are truly very different. The humanities

were already paving the way for the 'human sciences', much more than we care to admit.

I would go to pieces emotionally when admiring Marlene [Dietrich] in *The Scarlet Empress* [1934] and, once the emotion had passed, consider the film, its star and my own emotions as facts that could be questioned and analyzed with passion. For analysis, too, is a passion, it is *the other passion*, and the greatest passion is to question one's own passion. The opposition between the heart and the mind is the most absurd of them all, at least in its simplistic form, which is too often what is emphasized.

Analysis is also a Passion

In short, the education I received – with the minutiae that is the underlying principle of translation exercises, with the complexities of the extinct languages, etc., with the implicit 'moral' of the matter, which requires calm, attentiveness, wariness toward being overly excited – led me to a 'spontaneous' practice that was, in reality, acquired from this education, a practice of objectification, including (*especially*) when it came to those things that I most dearly treasured. The semiological project is born (for me) from this conjunction. When I read articles on Hitchcock that were limited to saying, in an exclamatory, feverish mode, 'I love Hitchcock!' I was dumbstruck, in spite of my own, very ardent, liking for the films of Hitchcock.

My way of doing things is also related to the fact that film semiology was a belated choice for me, which came when I was about thirty years old, and which was preceded by a wide range of different activities. For example, I was a translator from German and English specializing in historical and theoretical works on jazz music, for *Cahiers du Jazz* and the Payot publishing house. When you do several different things, each one tends to 'objectify' the other.

Gardies: Is this need for objectification also at the origin of your work on the 'imaginary signifier'?

Metz: Absolutely. My point of departure is that there is no contradiction, no incompatibility, between emotional affect and 'intellectual' analysis. It has often been observed that reflecting on our feelings does nothing to change them (they are stronger than this). Fellini's *8 ½*, which I have studied a lot,⁷ still moves me every time I watch the film.

Gardies: Objectification allows us to invent a discourse (I will come back to this) while holding onto these emotions.

Metz: Yes. And even, if it is appropriate, an 'autobiographical' discourse (without all the useless probing into personal lives): my fascination for Ava Gardner is not unrelated to a familial lack that I can feel, and that I can talk about more or less clearly...

The Cinema as an Object of Teaching

Gardies: Something really strikes me about what you have just said: namely, the presence of this essential Barthesian stance according to which the fundamental human activity is discursive activity. That is, we must find, invent and produce the right discourse, the discourse that allows us to talk correctly about certain objects while constituting them as such.

Metz: I would add: the right discourse on what touches us the most. Take the objects of Barthes' discourse, for instance: Racine, Michelet, *Werther*, the photograph of his mother...

Gardies: Is there not a link between the emergence of a possible objectifying discourse and the present development of teaching cinema at the university?

Metz: The question could, in fact, be posed as follows: how has it come about that the cinema, today, is taught in several French universities, by a significant number of teacher-researchers, the majority of whom are quite respectable, whereas twenty years ago there was only a tiny number of them?

This surprisingly rapid expansion has, in my opinion, been the result of three contributing factors, which are partially independent of each other (it is their conjunction that has advanced matters). Firstly, there was the relative mental liberation of the university after the explosion of 1968, a partial but real drop in the level of naivety. Then there was the indefatigable devotion of a few individuals (Michel Marie being a prototypical example), who had a taste and a flair for organization, and who created the necessary networks. Finally, to return to the subject of our interview, the presence of a *teachable* 'corpus'. (Michel Marie again, and Roger Odin have said very interesting things on this matter⁸). For love is not something that is taught. The always renewable complicit pleasure of watching the obvious codes

of the classical Western in action, the passionate admiration for Bresson's 'Jansenism', Rossellini's Franciscanism, Louise Brooks' famous bob, Mizoguchi's framing, Renoir's dialogues, etc.; all these points of fascination that I have in common (yes, I do indeed...) with the film critics of my generation, all this cannot be taught, it is an imprint of our feelings, a valuable piece of baggage that is both collective and, for each individual, intimate, fetishized.

Gardies: Does this mean that with the 'teachable' we have entered the era of knowledge [*savoir*]?

Metz: That word is perhaps a bit strong. I would prefer to say: the transmissible. And, by the same token, we have seen the formation of a small group of scholars who have in common, if not their 'ideas', at least some principles of discussion, of theoretical proximity, precision, a 'separation' between criticism and attack, etc.

Gardies: Perhaps there has also been the specific development of semiology itself? At a given moment, research carried out in neighboring fields, or outside academia, was able to establish exchanges and meeting points with what we could call the primary core.

Metz: Of course (and fortunately!). It should also be clarified that this transmissible 'corpus' I spoke about was not provided by semiology alone, except right at the beginning. The role of semiology has more been to shake things up a bit, and unleash a more diverse movement.

Gardies: Previously, the transmissible, institutionally recognized discourse – the first teaching positions, created in the immediate aftermath of 1968, attest to this – was that of film history, or general aesthetics. At the time, did semiology allow for an extension and a diversification of this discourse?

Metz: Yes. But film history remains an essential task. I have sometimes been wrongly criticized by those who condescendingly adopt the mantle of History, who do not see that there are distinct projects which *do not match up with each other* (the mania for 'articulating' everything with everything else is absurd). This is why I would never allow myself the inverse (and corresponding) dishonesty that would consist of despising historical research and teaching, or foisting semiological methods on them. We have to put a stop to this pointless bickering, which annoyingly shows up the

underdevelopment of the field of 'film studies' to everybody (and I do mean to say 'the field'; this is not a question of individual flaws, but the result of a history, the history of this discipline, its marginality, etc.).

Gardies: But, at present, after this exponential expansion of the teaching of film studies, is there not the risk of academicism, or even a fossilization of scholarship, as the price paid for success?

Metz: It is more than a danger, it is the actual state of things. But this is a specific aspect of those movements that become well-known. See, for example, pseudo-Derridean deconstructionism in certain French departments in the United States, which is a form of scholasticism, like bad semiology.

Because you have broached this point, I will add that I am in no way an advocate of indefinitely extending the teaching of film studies. It has its place in the University, where we offer a large number of specialized disciplines, but if we imagined, like certain enthusiastic reformers, integrating it into basic education, then we would also end up having to include music, painting, three living languages, architecture, audio-visual studies, physical education, etc. So we would end up with a nonsensical list, whose only merit would be to remind ourselves that the function of mandatory schooling is *actually* to transmit the major tools of thought, which are small in number, and not to explore everything that is '*learnable*'.

But I will return to what you said about the perennial possibility of fossilization. When this occurs, we cannot do anything about it: how can we foster inspiration and initiative in a sclerotic scholar – that is, a sclerotic *person*? Where we can act is 'around the edges', thanks to those who have retained a freedom of mind, whether they are semiologists or not.

The Film Studies Landscape

Gardies: Indeed, today it seems that film semiology has spread to other domains, that it has created zones of specificity that the 'first generation' had not explored.

Metz: Yes, semiology has introduced – *either directly, or as a backlash* – a breath of fresh air, a general renewal of film studies (I am only speaking of theoretical studies here), which goes well beyond purely semiological writings, and which has resulted in a large number of specialized publications.

In this rich outpouring, I would distinguish three categories, or, in any case, three categories that are of interest to me, that have enriched, completed or modified my initial contribution rather than repeated it while distorting it in all directions. This does not include those who have definitely headed off for new territories. As you see, I do not count on annexing them to my own work, but they do participate in the overall movement over the last 25 years.

At Cerisy, in a few days [the colloquium 'Christian Metz and Film Theory', held at the Cultural Centre of Cerisy in 1989], I will cite the names of scholars (including yourself) while trying to briefly situate the work of each one – close to a hundred of them in all. But it would be overly fastidious to write this all down, so I will limit myself to a few particularly clear examples, without any thought of creating hierarchies or awarding prizes, in order to try to let it be understood what my three 'groupings' consist of. Roughly defined, they would be formulated as follows:

1. Those who were originally 'Metzians', and who have added something to Metz's work, inflecting it or extending it, or transcending it to go further, etc. The clearest example here is Michel Colin, an exceptionally creative mind, who tragically died, and whose memory should be acknowledged with the utmost respect. But I am also thinking of the advocates of semio-pragmatics, or certain forms of narratology.
2. Non-Metzian semiologists; that is, explicitly semiological undertakings that are independent of my work, if you exclude the inevitable interferences due to the climate of the era. The prototype here is Marie-Claire Ropars and her theory of *écriture*. Or even, in America, John M. Carroll and his psycho-linguistics of the cinema.
3. Extra-semiological works, which are very important to my unrepentantly pluralist eyes, because they show that the emergence of semiology has not impeded the development of the rest of the discipline. Here, I would immediately point (in France) to Michel Chion, Pascal Bonitzer, Dominique Noguez, Jacques Aumont, the three Jean-Louis (= Baudry, Leutrat, Schefer) and a few others.
4. Finally, to refine these classifications, there are intermediate positions, like those of Raymond Bellour and Thierry Kuntzel, who are at once 'Metzian' and fiercely independent.

The work of the Anglo-Saxon feminists, which I find very interesting, would also occupy a specific place: they often owe a lot to my book *The Imaginary Signifier*, while critiquing it on certain points.

Another clarification: when I speak of general renewal, I do not mean in an absolute or dramatic sense. There have been other renewals in the history of film theory, whether before my contribution (for instance, the first incarnation of *Revue de Cinéma* and Jean-George Auriol), or afterwards, with Deleuze's extraordinary intervention. In my mind, we have a *dated* renewal effect, as is also the case with the others. I was always astonished by those cataclysmically-inclined minds who see every book as refuting all the others, of such a kind that the anguish of divisive choices and revisions knows no end.

Refusing the School Mentality

Gardies: A classification such as your own could be surprising, because you have integrated both people who work in a manner quite close to semiology and people who are external to it. Since semiology cannot be the criterion for selection, what criteria are pertinent for you in making your selection?

Metz: My criterion is an open semiology, alien to any school mentality, refusing to condemn everything that happens outside of such a school, and focused on peacefully pursuing one's own projects. Schools, in our disciplines (and perhaps in all disciplines?), are instruments of power, 'terror' and rejection, they are machines automatically manufacturing schisms and other heresies, sometimes even hatred. Every week I receive up to twenty (and sometimes even more) professional letters, occasionally accompanied by a written project, coming from France and abroad, and I am well placed – by this and by the very diverse range of people attending my seminars – to see the ravages caused by Schools, which sometimes paralyze the best writers with the anguish of orthodoxy, while inciting among other people the childish hope of finally having the universal key, *the* method, etc.

I would also like, by means of this cavalier overview, to react against a confusion I have seen at work here and there, the confusion between 'film semiology' and 'the works of Christian Metz'. It evidently relates to the fact that I was the first one to begin this work (I am also, let's not forget, the oldest member of the gang). But it has an absurd side, because it would be impossible to call me the initiator of something if nobody had followed me, if I was all alone in the landscape, that is, if there was nothing for me to have 'initiated'. This is an absurd confusion, and what is more, it is unjust: unjust for all the film semiologists who are working today in various different countries, and unjust also, or at least inaccurate, in another, less obvious

but no less serious, sense: blinded by labels, some people fail to see that around a fifth of my writings, the equivalent of a whole book (texts such as my article on 8 ½), are only partly semiological in nature and, whether good or bad, essentially consist of 'studies' of a classical type, rather similar to longer articles that film journals occasionally publish.

To come back to the point, or to summarize what I have been saying, I would like to show *both* that semiology, for its 25 years of existence, has played an important role, and that it was not alone. I think any other position is inexact and, in the end, dishonest.

Gardies: Independently of their fundamental options, for what reasons are the works that you evoke 'good objects' in your eyes? In other terms, what qualities do you expect of a work in order to recognize some value in it?

Metz: It should be serious, rigorous... The qualities one expects of any intellectual work... The standard of writing, of course...

Gardies: Being serious and rigorous, here we come back to...

Metz: Not only being serious and rigorous, but also the novelty of the contribution, the exploration of little known terrain, the filling in of a gap...

Gardies: In other words, the three qualities you have constantly mobilized in your own work.

I believe that what is also important, but you are unable to say it, is that this rich, diverse, thriving activity exists because you have never had any desire for being exclusive. This is both a deontological and scientific position that is totally opposed to the sectarianism and zealotry which semiology has too often been accused of.

Metz: I do not see for what sake one could pronounce an exclusivity for our research where the 'truth' is evasive, multiple and admits several different perspectives (which does not, however, mean that any idiocy should be validated). Way back in 1964, in the final pages of my first long article, I took the effort to explain in detail that 'my semiology was unable and unwilling to replace the other approaches toward the cinema (criticism, history, etc.)'. I hoped for a calm and courteous insertion *alongside* the existing and future orientations. I added that it should go back over the entire past of film theory (I was still naïve and I had no idea that at this time I was virtually the only one, along with Jean Mitry and two or three others, to know this

past...). On the whole, little attention has been paid to these concluding pages, or it has been felt that they were just there to be polite, whereas in my eyes they were of the utmost importance. And all of a sudden, despite such a precautionary statement, I had whipped up a hurricane, with people rallying 'for' and 'against' me, like in a rugby match. I was turned into a living God, or into a Great Satan. All this is quite amazing, and I was largely powerless before the sporadically catastrophic sociology of the intellectual and academic machinery.

But not entirely impotent: confronted with this turn of events, I have striven, for more than fifteen years, to '*break up*', through passages published in prefaces or interviews, not (of course) the idea of semiology and less still the works of numerous scholars of quality who surround me at varying distances, but to break up semiology as a dogma, or as a superego (= a school, once more). And I fully intend to continue to do so, just as I have done in this very moment.

Gardies: Something else. Whereas the terms '*sémiotique*' [semiotics] and '*sémiologie*' [semiology] are given as equivalents, or sometimes competitors, which of the two do you prefer?

Metz: I prefer *sémiologie*. Because *sémiologie* means Roland Barthes, Saussure, the European tradition, which does not separate semiology from philosophy, from general culture, from the literary tradition.

Sémiotique clearly orients toward other forms of thought: the rational empiricism of the Anglo-Saxons, or on the contrary the vast edifice established by Greimas. I do not underestimate these phenomena, but they are alien to my way of thinking.

My Current Work

Gardies: What if we spoke about Christian Metz now, about his work, his projects? We have had the habit of expecting books written by Christian Metz, but it has been a long time since you published anything. I imagine that there is a reason for this.

Metz: Yes, I have been silent for a long time. Firstly, as a result of personal issues, which are now over. And right afterwards, because I worked a lot on a manuscript on the joke, a literary and psychoanalytic study, the joke in Freud, as well as more generally speaking. It was finished, but I was not

satisfied with it, above all its structure, its mode of exposition, uselessly long and weighty. In short, I put it to one side, 'in the cooler', in order to return to it in my retirement. In our circles, it is customary not to speak of our failures (this is another superfluous taboo), but I find this custom quite idiotic: do we hope to make other people believe that we have never failed at anything?

As for my current work – 'current' meaning that it has occupied my attention for the last four years – it relates to the notion of enunciation, and more specifically enunciation in the cinema. I am preparing a book, about which I will not say too much, for my two articles recently published in *Vertigo* have already given an idea about it.⁹ The subject, by the way, is not original, it is in the air. There was the special issue of *Communications* (no. 38) in 1983,¹⁰ the work done by the Italians, and many others; you yourself took part in this debate, in your article 'Le su et le vu', and in your book on African cinema.¹¹

To simplify matters drastically, I can express the idea of this book in a single phrase: the conceptions of filmic enunciation that are often proposed appear to me to be too closely linked to the linguistic model, with deictics, enunciator/enunciatee, I/you, etc., whereas enunciation, in a *dispositif* without an interlocutor, can only be of a metadiscursive type, folded in on itself, whose content is 'It's a film' more than 'It's me'.

Filmic enunciation is impersonal and is often confused with the very *place* of the film. As its 'markers' it has everything that, in a film, reminds the spectators that they are watching a film, or that they are in a cinema. On this basis, I give an overview of different 'positions' of enunciation more or less governed by rules: the off-screen voice addressed to the viewer, the dialogue title-card, the I-voice of the character ('voice-over'), the subjective image, extra-diegetic music, etc., with, in each case, various examples of shots and sequences drawn from the repertoire of well-known films (this will be a more 'concrete' book than the other ones, to put it bluntly).

The exploration of the deictic 'network' is, by the way, a normal and necessary approach in the early stages, as Jean Paul Simon mentioned to me, who theorized these problems very early on. And yet, the most deictic filmic constructions, like the off-screen voice directly interpellating the spectator, still stage a false deixis, or more precisely a simulated deixis, because the spectator cannot respond...

Gardies: Like the aside in theater?

Metz: Exactly. Incidentally, Vernet and Casetti have both made this comparison.

Gardies: In the midst of this discussion of enunciation, I note that we have not broached a question that is nonetheless important as far as semiology is concerned: is one of its major contributions its emphasis on the textual dimension of the film, thereby provoking a clear rupture with the discourse of the widespread *doxa* on cinema, 'The cinema is life, it is reality, etc.'? In a certain way, has semiology not adopted, without saying so, these words by a certain famous filmmaker, 'A just image is just an image'? Filmic enunciation, we have just said, has the specific function of designating itself as cinema, and hence of disturbing the transparency of the windowpane.

Metz: Yes, but to varying degrees and in different modes. If enunciation is never entirely 'effaced', it can happen, willingly or not, that it is 'marked' with a great deal of discretion.

This reflexive conception of enunciation, so to speak (the text that more or less refers to itself) has been prefigured, to my mind, in certain remarks made by Pierre Sorlin, Marie-Claire Ropars, yourself, and François Jost. In my case, it has become the guiding thread of my whole work. But I owe a lot to all those theorists – there are at least fifteen of them – who have studied this question, and who, by the way, I cite abundantly.

Gardies: I believe that you would not want to end this interview without paying homage to someone who was very important to you.

Metz: Yes. I am *unwilling* and *unable* to finish without a thought for my only mentor, Roland Barthes who, in 1966, assigned to me the task of taking care of film semiology in the École des hautes études. Of course, I inherited neither his genius nor his style (his way of writing books, but also his elegant and inimitable manner of managing the profession's day-to-day administration, which Jacques Le Goff evoked so well¹²). On many points, I have not adopted his ideas. But he taught me day by day for 24 years – from 1956 until his death in 1980, as I knew him when I was still teaching at a *lycée*. He taught me something that is just as important as any of his theories, and that I strive to put into practice with my own, obviously more modest, means: the meticulous attention one must give other people, and which is generally lacking in scientific exchanges; the bypassing of hardened divisions like 'structuralism', 'schizo-analysis', 'post-modernism', etc.; the refusal of all brash tirades and triumphalist boastings; the avoidance of all jargon, including the jargon of semiology; the necessary inscription of specialized research in a vaster, older culture, not through pedantic citations,

but through tone, and a concern for style even in technical publications, the choice of the exact word even outside of the terms defined by theory; and above all, his amicability, which in his case led to a recognition of kindness and civility, spontaneously undertaken, day after day, to the benefit of the lowliest student who came to visit him, and this despite the fact that our crumbling universe, founded on *demand* and the self-engendered hysteria of the institutions, crushed him with fatigue and was the nightmare of his life. Amicability is not friendship (the latter is not commanded, it is encountered, and it would be absurd to wish to generalize it through some kind of precept), but it is an indispensable prerequisite, and is insufficiently perceived as such, for remotely normal relations between scholars, for the opening of a breathable space for agreements and disagreements, for discussions exempt from theatrical stiffness or anguished hostility, and, by dint of this, for more rapid progress in scholarship itself.

Conversation recorded by André Gardies (Paris, June 15, 1989).

Notes

1. 'Le cinéma. Langue ou langage?' in *Communications* 4 (special issue on 'Recherches sémiologiques', ed. Roland Barthes, 1964). Reworked version in Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* vol. 1 (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968) [*Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, pp. 31–91.]
2. [Jean Bessalel, 'Onze concepts clés lexique'. *CinémAction*, 58 (1991), pp. 158–173.]
3. *Filmology: Establishing a Problematic for Film Study in France (1946–55)*, PhD, Austin, TX, 1982, p. 412 [Published as: Edward Lowry, *Filmology Movement and Film Study in France* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985).]
4. [Jean-Louis Schefer, *L'homme ordinaire du cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).]
5. In the collective volume entitled *Pour une esthétique sans entraves – Mélanges Mikel Dufrenne* (Paris: 10/18, 1975). Repr. in Christian Metz, *Essais sémiotiques* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977). [Translated as 'The Perceived and the Named' in *Studies in Visual Communication* 6, 3 (1980), pp. 56–68.]
6. [A two year pre-degree preparatory class in literature and the humanities.]
7. 'La construction 'en abyme' dans *Huit et Demi* de Fellini', *Revue d'esthétique* 19:1 (January–March 1966). Repr. in Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* vol. I (cf. note 1). [*Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, pp. 228–234.]
8. Michel Marie, 'L'enseignement du cinéma et l'hydre sémiologique', *Ça-Cinéma* 18 (1979); Roger Odin, 'Rêverie pédagogique', *Hors-Cadre* 5 ('L'école-cinéma', 1987).

9. 'L'énonciation impersonnelle, ou le site du film (en Marge de Travaux Récents sur l'énonciation au cinéma)', *Vertigo* 1 (November 1987). [See Christian Metz, *The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).]
10. 'Énonciation et cinéma', special issue edited by Jean-Paul Simon and Marc Vernet.
11. 'Le su et le vu', *Hors-Cadre* 2 ('Cinénarrables', 1984); *Cinéma d'Afrique noire francophone. L'espace miroir* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989).
12. 'Barthes Administrateur', pp. 43–48, *Communications* 36 ('Roland Barthes', 1982).

