21. The Semiology of Cinema? It Is Necessary to Continue!

A Conversation with Christian Metz

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Abstract
This interview was conducted in Bologna in October 1988. The conversation unfolds along the three historical phases of Metz's work – the semio-linguistic, the semio-psychoanalytic, and the text-pragmatical phase on filmic enunciation. Metz self-critically returns to his proposition of a Grand Syntagmatique of film. In addition, he embeds his film-semiological approach in a meta-theoretical and meta-historical reflection, and talks about how much his thinking owes to André Bazin, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jean Mitry, and many others.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, Grand Syntagmatique, film phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory of cinema, enunciation theory, cinephilia

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In his last book, Jean Mitry talks about a young student who in 1964 came to him with a manuscript entitled 'The Cinema: Language or Language

System?',[1] *which was destined to hold an important place in later studies of cinema. What do you remember about Jean Mitry and the situation of cinema theory in France at the beginning of the 1960s?*

I in fact spoke a lot with Jean Mitry because I greatly admired his work and still do. I don't remember the exact moment when I showed him that manuscript, because it happened a long time ago. But I do remember talking with him frequently. I thought – and I still think – that semiology should be based on all earlier theoretical production, and that it should not present itself as a moment of rupture, and even less as a so-called epistemological rupture. I also remember that Mitry's reaction at the time was extremely friendly – Jean Mitry was a truly kind person – even if he was a little frightened by this slightly crazed young man who often said the same things he was saying but in a different manner.

As for the theoretical situation at the beginning of the 1960s in France, well, there wasn't anything. Let's say that between Bazin, whose influence ended in 1958-59 or 1960, and the first book of Mitry in 1963, along with my article in 1964 and Mitry's second book in 1965,[2] there was a gap. Not a very big one, if you wish, four or five years, but noticeable. Those are not many years, yet still, they are many. It was a period when no-one spoke any longer of the theory of cinema; talk began again on my work and on Mitry's book. Certainly not in the same way because Mitry's book was a book looking at the past, a splendid summa of all that had been acquired in the past, while my work was looking at the future. In reality it was only a question of age – Mitry and I certainly did not have the same age. History is sometimes unjust, because Mitry's book is very important and it is for this reason that I absolutely wanted to review it at length in two articles, a hundred pages altogether, published then in *Essais II*.[3]

1 Metz's article, 'Le cinéma: langue ou langage', appeared first in *Communications,* 4 (1964) and was reprinted in *Essais sur la signification au cinéma,* 2 vols. (Paris: Klincksieck 1968), I, pp. 39-93. It was translated into English as 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?', in *Film Language. A Semiotics of the Cinema,* trans. by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 31-91.

2 The books of Jean Mitry that Metz is referring to are the two volumes of *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (Paris, Editions Universitaires, 1963 and 1965), later republished in English in one volume as *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, trans. by Christopher King (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

3 Christian Metz, 'Une étape dans la réflexion sur le cinéma' [1964] and 'Problèmes actuels de théorie du cinéma' [1967], in: *Essais sur la signification*, 2 vols. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), II, pp. 13-34 and 35-86.

What kind of education did you have?

I had a classical education, the most classical it is possible to have in France: I studied at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, I am an *agrégé* in Classical Letters, *licencié* in German, I have a diploma in ancient Greek history, in short, the education of a classical philologist. On the other hand, from a very early age, from the age of sixteen, I have been a militant cinephile. I was active in the Fédération Française des Ciné-clubs, a movement born in France after the Liberation, and during the last year of *lycée* I founded the cineclub of Béziers, the town where I lived at the time. As a militant, I was chairman of the cineclub for the preparatory classes for the Grandes Ecoles, at the Henri IV Lycée in Paris, and chairman of the cineclub of the Ecole Normale Supérieure. In short, I was a cinephile, I loved and I still love the cinema. My education was double: classical on one side – my parents, after all, were university professors – and cinephile on the other.

How did you come to semiology?

I got to semiology by myself because at that time there was no other way. There were no specific courses then. And come to think of it, there were not even courses in general linguistics; the first one was created by André Martinet at the end of the 1950s. Anyone who got into semiology got there through a friend or through his own reading.

Were you a friend of scholars like Roland Barthes and Algirdas J. Greimas who, like you, began to develop interest in semiology in those years?

I was a good friend of Barthes, and we remained good friends to the end. With Greimas it was different. In 1963, under the auspices and with the aid of Barthes, Greimas created a department of semio-linguistics in Lévi-Strauss's laboratory of social anthropology at the Collège de France. It was a great innovation at the time. Greimas needed a general secretary who dealt with organizational matters, and asked Barthes, who was his good friend, to suggest someone, and Barthes proposed me. I did not yet know him personally; it was Barthes who introduced me to him. That is how I got into the Ecoles des Hautes Etudes, where I still am. But I stayed with Greimas only four or five years, then I left him because I did not agree with the excessive rigidity of his theory. It is a theory I am not comfortable with because, how to say it, I think he adopted explanatory procedures that are more difficult to understand

than the thing being explained. Therefore, even though we remained very friendly on a personal level, in 1968-69 I resigned and went back to Barthes. That is my story.

Let's go back to your article: after the publication of 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?'*, you had a chance to discuss the themes anew with Umberto Eco and Emilio Garroni during the Festival of Pesaro. Did that encounter in some way modify your views, especially your idea – which derived from Bazin – of language without code?*

Yes, very much. It is true that my discussions with the 'Italian school' influenced me enormously because I belong to a generation which, in France, is fundamentally Bazinian. The influence of Bazin was huge and even now I am rather Bazinian. I mean my head isn't, but deeper down… It was precisely my Italian friends who focused my attention on the fact that a language can seem natural but that this impression of naturalness can be created by codes that are not natural – think of Eco's theory of iconism. It was under the influence of discussions with Eco and Garroni that I elaborated my theory of codes that 'construct' the analogy, in opposition to the codes that are added to the analogy.

Pier Paolo Pasolini also took part in the Pesaro meetings, and between the mid-1960s and the beginning of the 1970s he wrote some essays on the semiology of cinema that were received with some interest at that time. Later, though, Pasolini's contribution was ignored by the semiology of cinema. Still, don't you think that Pasolini had some interesting intuitions?

Yes, Pasolini was an extraordinary personality. When the Festival of Pesaro was in its first years – a great time – we were friends. I believe that in fact Pasolini had striking intuitions but that he expressed them 'badly', so to speak, on a scientific level, and this discredited him with scholars. For example, he said that cinema was a language [*langue*], and to support that he invented a definition of language [*langue*] that had value only for him … He was a poet. This does not take away from the fact that Pasolini had extraordinary intuitions. I am thinking especially of the 'free indirect subjective' [*caméra subjective indirecte libre*] that I am using explicitly in the book I am working on now, but in a less poetical and more scientific sense. The idea is that of a free indirect discourse in cinema as one of the positions of enunciation frequent in films.

The second Italian stage of your evolution as a researcher was Urbino. In 1972 you took part in the inauguration of the Centro internazionale di semiotica e linguistica; what can you tell us about this experience?

For me it was an important experience, especially from a didactic point of view. Initially the Urbino centre was conceived of as a permanent study centre; it was not organized for summer sessions as it is now. But it functioned for only one year. When we inaugurated it in January 1972, the idea was to gather a group of about twenty students chosen from all over the world who were to remain there an entire year with three different teachers each month. I took the first month, and therefore I can say that I 'created' the centre. I have a truly beautiful memory of it. Urbino in the middle of winter was like a ship in the middle of clouds, really, you never saw anything, it was always foggy. Students and teachers stayed at the same hotel, the Piero della Francesca. The college did not yet exist. With the students there was continuous contact, something I have never found again. We worked splendidly, all day, and everyone learned so many things. Students gave reports and professors altered their lessons on the basis of the students' questions. Then in the evening we all went dancing together. Marvelous! Later there were economic difficulties and Urbino became what it is today. In any case, for me it was an extraordinary human experience in teaching and in sociability.

Those were also the years of the widest spread of the Grand Syntagmatique, which has been one of your most cited but also most criticized elaborations. What do you think its importance then was, and what value might it have today?

I believe that if you consider the Grand Syntagmatique as it is, it in effect has no more value at all today because there are too many errors. On the other hand, I think that it was very useful at the time because it was the first systematic attempt to show that in film there are codes. I wanted to show that there is a code and I erred. It was too early, I was too ambitious, but I did demonstrate that there are codes and I believe that the liveliness of both praise and criticism was precisely due to the fact that someone, for the first time, said it. The fact then that there are not eight syntagmatic types has little importance. It was a question of affirming the code-like nature of a language that everyone considered natural, ineffable, artistic.

Certainly the Grand Syntagmatique has been much criticized, it was applied around the world, and the most interesting thing is that in some cases it was applied and criticized contemporaneously, that is to say that it was applied with changes, and that is a good thing because these are cases of constructive criticism. Moreover it never stopped being spoken of, and the last person who did so in detail – I say this with sadness – was Michel Colin, who unfortunately died last Tuesday[4] in a stupid accident on the road. Colin had written a long article entitled 'The Grand Syntagmatique Revisited' in which he demonstrated that I should have followed a different path.[5] It is an article half in favour and half against the Grand Syntagmatique, which he elaborates anew in a form that is certainly not perfect but which nevertheless is a big step forward. Concerning this, a phrase of Raymond Bellour comes to mind that seems right to me. Bellour wrote, in an article on the film *Gigi* [Vincente Minelli, USA 1958], that the Grand Syntagmatique is operative ideally.[6] I believe that that is a sufficiently exact expression: it means that ideally it permits the segmentation of a film, but in reality, no, it does not permit it. In other words, I think I had an idea, but I had it too early and I did not go into it deeply enough. Nonetheless if someone – not me, because I don't feel like it anymore – took up again everything that has been written for and against the Grand Syntagmatique, he could make a true syntagmatic, or at least truer. It is necessary to be modest in science.

The next stage in the evolution of your studies was the publication in 1971 of Language and Cinema.[7] *What do you think of the proliferation of textual analyses engendered by your suggestions in that volume?*

I think that textual analysis has been an excellent thing. In the literary field, and in philology, there has always been the habit of speaking of a text only when one knew it well, when it was in front of one. While for cinema, one spoke of texts saying 'do you remember at the end of *The Third Man*... [Carol Reed, UK 1949]' and 'at the end' could mean at minute 120, 123, 126 ... Thus a habit of imprecision, of vagueness was created, as though not citing

4 18 October 1988.

5 Michel Colin, 'The Grand Syntagmatique Revisited' [1989], trans. by Claudine Tourniaire, in *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind,* ed. by Warren Buckland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), pp. 45-86.

6 Raymond Bellour, 'To Segment / To Analyse (on *Gigi*)' [1976], in *The Analyses of Film*, ed. by Constance Penley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000 [1979]), pp. 193-216.

7 Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, trans. by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1974 [1971]).

a thing was normal. Textual analysis obliged researchers to see how a film is made, minute by minute. And it obliged them to go beyond the signified. Until then, one spoke of films in terms of the signified, one said 'it is the moment when Greta Garbo embraces Clark Gable' and this is the signified. No one ever said 'it is the moment when there is a shot/reverse shot'. Textual analysis makes it necessary to look also at the signifier, to observe for each frame the dimension of scale, the angle, the lighting – in short, to consider all the parameters of the signifier. The enormous development of textual analyses, however, I believe occurred under a double influence: *Language and Cinema*, of course, but also other works like those of Raymond Bellour and Marie-Claire Ropars, who in fact did the first textual analyses. I said that it was necessary to do these but I never did any, perhaps because I did not enjoy doing them. I pointed out a path, let's say, from a conceptual point of view, but it is necessary to pay homage to those who followed it. In chronological order, the first were Bellour and Ropars, then naturally the analyses came by the hundreds.

The second aspect of the problem is that this practice has its limits. It is evident that it is not possible to do an analysis of all existing films. Even if through textual analysis one understands the mechanism of the film, its functioning, a time arrives when it is necessary to stop. There are many problems: first of all it is a procedure requiring an enormous amount of time, and the results are illegible. A textual analysis is impossible to read.

I believe, therefore, that it is necessary to distinguish two things: in teaching cinema, above all for the youngest students, textual analysis is an irreplaceable pedagogical tool. As for written textual analysis, I believe that new formulas must be found; we are waiting for someone to invent new formulas, either with videocassettes or by writing in a different way. Because the books in which there is 'frame 347, frame 348…' are really unreadable.

Do you think the same thing about the descriptions of silent films made by the team coordinated by André Gaudreault?[8]

Silent films are perhaps the only field where this practice still finds justification, because there is a risk of losing them. Their descriptions are equally tiresome to read, but in the case of very old films they are justified by the fact that one day there will remain only the report of Gaudreault. But even here there are problems. Gaudreault would like to expand his reporting project to more countries. I saw the type of model

8 *Ce que je vois de mon ciné,* ed. by André Gaudreault (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1988).

report that he is proposing, and it is crazy, every thirty seconds of film becomes thirty pages and that is certainly not admissible. A solution must be found.

And concerning the chapter dedicated to tricks, which was published in 1972 in the second volume of the Essais sur la signification au cinéma, *what do you think today?*

That is something of mine that I would not change much, all the more so because I think it partly prefigured *The Imaginary Signifier* in its concept of the use of diegesis and in the recourse to the theory of denegation.[9] Yes, I think I would still subscribe to it today.

What was the origin of your interest in psychoanalysis? When you published The Imaginary Signifier, *did you mean to move beyond your earlier semiotic interests, or did you intend this work as a continuation of them?*

My interest in psychoanalysis was not born in a professional perspective, it was born in a personal perspective, because I had some existential problems and I chose to undergo psychoanalytic therapy, which lasted ten years. It was only after three or four years of therapy that psychoanalysis began to interest me as an intellectual field. At the beginning, no, it was as though I were going to the dentist, only it was a slightly special dentist… But I went to the sessions and that was that, I did not read anything on the subject. In a second phase, I began to glimpse a link with my work, and I began to read Freud, Melanie Klein, Lacan, etc. And it had nothing to do with a negation of my preceding work but was rather a deepening of it, since for me psychoanalysis does not replace semiology but is precisely a psychoanalysis of the code, of the institution of cinema, of the code of the spectator. I never did an anthropomorphic psychoanalysis of the cineaste or of the characters of a film, understood as individuals. There are already enough sentiments in life… From the moment psychoanalysis became linked to my work, it became semiotic psychoanalysis of the dispositive, of the code of cinema.

The Imaginary Signifier *includes an essay, the one dedicated to Benveniste, which once again led the semiology of cinema in the following years, especially*

9 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, transl. by Celia Britton and others (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982 [1977]).

towards the problem of enunciation[10]*. What are the differences between your approach to enunciation then and later studies on the subject?*

I think that the main difference is that in that essay I was very affirmative, perhaps too much so, concerning the fact that in classical cinema there are no enunciation marks. I spoke of a story without discourse, or almost, and in that I went too far. At the same time, I think that that essay had the merit of proposing a theory, so to speak, that was extreme. But I do not think that it was exact, and today I think differently. Today I am struck by the fact that even in the most classical Hollywood films, there are continuously marks of enunciation, enunciative positions. Today my notion of transparency would be much subtler, and the researchers who have spoken of enunciation after me in effect do it much more subtly. I think no one can any longer believe in a transparency in the total way I meant. At the time, I had been struck by a trend toward transparency, and I went to the bottom of it. There is some excess in that article.

Recently, you returned to your semiological interests and published, in the new magazine Vertigo*, a long article called 'The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film'.*[11] *In this article, you express some reservations concerning the use of deictics in the theories of enunciation in film. Can you sum up the main points?*

The main point is quite simple: the very notion of deixis in linguistics and also in logic or in pragmatics is linked to oral conversation. In oral conversation, the person is 'I' when he or she speaks and 'you' when another speaks, and it is the possibility of this exchange that defines deictics. An 'I' that cannot become 'you' is not an 'I' for a linguist, for Benveniste, for Jakobson, for a logician, for a psychoanalyst. An 'I' that cannot become 'you' is the definition of love. Deictics presuppose the possibility of exchange, and it is at the base of the theory of enunciation that was born precisely with that of deixis. This is very clear in Benveniste when, in the essay where he defines

10 Christian Metz, 'Story/Discourse (A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)' [1975], in *The Imaginary Signifier*, pp. 89-98.

11 Christian Metz, published in English for the first time as 'The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film (In the margin of recent works on enunciation in cinema)' [1988], trans. by Béatrice Durand-Sendrail and others, *New Literary History,* 2/3 (1991), 747-72 (p. 749). This essay would appear, slightly modified, as the first chapter of Christian Metz's *L'énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991), pp. 9-36 (see the new translation by Cormac Deane of the whole book from Columbia University Press in 2016).

story and discourse, he gives as examples conversation and written passages that reproduce conversations.[12] Fundamentally I believe that, since this model of deixis is linked to the reversibility of 'I' and 'you'; it is not applicable to 'monodirectional' discourses, as Bettetini intends them, as in films or novels.[13] What leads us to err is that there is an 'I' and a 'you' in the novel, but they are intradiegetic. What also leads to error is the fact that the film or the novel can say 'you' to the reader – 'Dear reader, you will be surprised …' – but this is a case of a false 'you' because it cannot respond. My objection is basically very simple: deictics are linked to oral exchange, the ping-pong in which 'I' becomes 'you' and vice-versa, continually. Outside that, there can be no real deictics, they become anaphoras. In a monodirectional discourse, there is no author; there was a collective or individual one when the film was realized, but at the moment the film is shown the author is not there. In this case it is not possible to discover the enunciator, or rather the enunciator is the film, which is to say an object, a thing. I believe that deictics have the inconvenience of rendering anthropomorphic that which is not and to make bidirectional that which is monodirectional.

Do you think the same about the use of the concept of focalization, initially conceived of by Genette for literary analysis?[14]

This question could be answered by François Jost better than by me.[15] In any event, I am in substantial agreement with him. I, too, think that in a novel the problem of knowing in what way a character got information does not arise. If it is because he saw something, that is in any case a false vision, because it is a matter of words; if it is something he heard, it still is a matter of words; if he smelled something, it remains a matter of words. To say it differently – and in this Jost is wholly correct – in a novel the channel of information has no importance; the only thing that counts is if the character knows or does not know something. The character who knows is the focalizer and we do not ask if he knows because he heard, smelled, or saw.

12 Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971 [1966]).

13 Gianfranco Bettetini, *La conversazione audiovisiva* (Milan: Bompiani, 1984).

14 See, for instance, in Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972). A selection of the essays from this book has been translated as *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press, 1980).

15 Metz is referring to the book of François Jost, *L'œil-caméra. Entre film et roman* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1987).

In cinema, everything is quite different because it is possible to see that a character has been informed of something because he has raised his head up very high, and in the film you see that through an unusual framing. So cinema makes pertinent not only the piece of information but also the channel through which this was obtained, all the more so because in films there are continually focalizations of pure knowledge, what the Anglo-Saxons call *transvisualization*. This is a very frequent phenomenon in American films. At the outset, the character speaks: 'I remember when I was young …' and then the voice-over disappears and a flashback shows the content of the memory in images. From that moment on, it is a question of pure knowledge. The knowledge of the character who remembers is displayed, and you cannot say that the point of view is his nor that the point of hearing is his. It is only a focalization, as in a novel. In short, cinema presents much more complicated phenomena. It presents cases of focalization in Genette's sense, in which only the knowledge of a character is stated, as happens in a novel. But it also presents cases where we are informed that the character got information through sight, cases that Jost would call ocularization. Or, finally, cases in which the character got information by hearing: auricularization according to Jost's terminology.

There, even if I am in agreement with the theorization of Jost, I do not like his terminology. In fact, I think it can hinder the spread of his theory. Terminological questions are important because sometimes a badly chosen word wrongs an idea. It seems to me that the word 'focalization' is used so much by researchers that to try to change it would be counterproductive. For Jost, as I am writing in the book I am working on, it would have been better to say 'cognitive focalization', or visual, or auditory. In short, to say the same thing with simpler terms.

What is the book that you are working on, the one you mentioned earlier?

I am working on a book on enunciation, on the topographical forms of enunciation, those where the viewer, the film, the *foyer* can position themselves in their mutual relations. So, in the point-of-view shot, things stand a certain way, another way in the objective storytelling, still another in a mirror, etc. It is almost a topography of film textuality. My aim is to come up with a theory of enunciation free from anthropomorphism, free from the idea of 'I', 'you', 'he/she', etc.

What do you think the prospects are for the theory of cinema?

What can I say? Currently, what characterizes the theory of cinema is a quite vigorous counterattack of American empiricism against structuralism, psychoanalysis, etc. – a counterattack that is not only scientific but also nationalistic, that is being developed by some researchers of the Anglo-Saxon area with sentiments that are decidedly xenophobic, anti-French. In part it is understandable because the United States has suffered France's intellectual colonialism for twenty years, and perhaps also Italy's. So now what is in fashion is the history of cinema, empirical studies, investigations… It is a very strong movement, probably because semiology and structuralism have been hegemonies for almost twenty years. But alongside this counterattack of empiricism and historicism, the theories inspired by structuralism, semiology, psychoanalysis remain nonetheless very strong even in the United States. It is simply that in the United States they are no longer the strongest. In France, yes, and I suppose the same is true of Italy even though I do not know the Italian situation well. Certainly there is a return to history, but in different forms. For example, in France there is a return to history which is another way of saying a return of imbeciles; but there is also another return to history, I am thinking for example of Jean-Louis Leutrat and his book on the Western, or of Jacques Aumont – they are doing structuralist history. And then there are cases apart, like that of David Bordwell, who along with all else is a formidable person: he works with a structuralist method, but he feels a visceral aversion to France, to Benveniste. He wrote a truly remarkable book and then he added considerations against people that were hardly polite…[16]

What will happen now? I believe that in some countries, as in France and Italy, theory will remain strong because in twenty years it has progressed greatly, even in institutions like universities. In the United States, the situation is more complex; one could suppose that theory will become progressively weaker, but I don't know. For countries like France and Italy however my diagnosis is not pessimistic.

Aside from this, I believe that the great period of structuralism has passed. There are historical periods that generally are not renewed, privileged moments caused by factors that are difficult to single out. It is evident, for example, that if a historian of ideas asked why in France – I use the example of France because it is the situation I know best – why in the 1960s until 1975-76, there was Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan,

16 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

Derrida, etc., it would be difficult for him to find an explanation. If we take the fifty years preceding this period, it is not easy to find so many people. It is certain that something has ended, but it is not easy to see what. Perhaps the period has ended when general ideas were conceived – of structuralism, of theory – and now we continue only applying them. In other words, I have been struck by a contradiction between two things: on the one hand, when I look around me, and also inside me, I feel that something has ended, I myself no longer have the feeling of inventing. The book that I am writing now, for instance: I am working on it with pleasure but I do not have the feeling of inventing. How can I say it, they are things that are already familiar to me ahead of time… On the other hand, however, I see in me and around me that good work is continuing to get done. What remains incomprehensible is why there was that so very privileged period, and why it has ended. Perhaps it is because there is always a beginning of things, as in the youth of a person or when one is in love. It is something that is difficult to explain rationally, and I am struck by the sight of many researchers around me who continue to do work that is important and interesting.

Like an amorous relation that moves forward well …

Yes, exactly, it moves forward well. There is no longer the same ardour of the beginning, but it has not yet run out. Once again, however, in the United States it is different. There, the battles are far harsher. While in France, I don't know in Italy, there are no longer battles between theory and other tendencies.

With regard to theory, unlike other researchers, you are a theoretician who has never personally applied his models to texts (*apart from the syntagmatic analysis of* Adieu Philippine [Jacques Rozier, F/I 1962]). *Why?*

I don't believe I have ever proposed models. The Grand Syntagmatique, yes, that was a model. But in the rest of my work, I never proposed real models, things that could be applied directly. In the case of textual analysis, for example, I said that it was necessary to do it but not how to do it. In *Language and Cinema*, I dedicated three chapters out of twelve to it, but their sole purpose was to show the difference between textual analysis and the analysis of codes. In any event, I am very sceptical about the notion of models.

Let's say then that you have always given the go-ahead to various tendencies in theory but that you never stopped looking forward and your interests have changed from time to time.

Yes, this is very exact. How to say it – applying my ideas does not amuse me. When an idea is written down, it belongs to the community of researchers and it is up to them to say if it is good or bad, applicable or not applicable, semi-applicable, criticizable. I prefer to move on to something else. For this reason, I never applied the Grand Syntagmatique. I had my students apply it but personally I never applied it. I get bored … Usually when I have finished a work, I feel a sort of void, and then I get another idea, and that is what then interests me. But there is something else: I am not the only one, there are many researchers who can verify to see if what I have done is good or bad. In short, that is not my job.

What then motivates you to do theory? Love for cinema? Do you think that love for cinema can stimulate the desire to theorize cinema?

No, I would say not. Unless in this love for cinema there is already a theoretical component, but that would be a tautology. I believe that a love for cinema in itself does not in the least impel theorizing about cinema. If anything, the opposite is true. I have been a Macmahonian cinephile, I participated in all the battles of film lovers in Paris, and all of my comrades-in-arms were stupid, even if they loved film and were fascinated by cinema. I believe that a love for cinema is indispensable for studying it, but that is certainly not sufficient. A shocking example is the level of movie magazines throughout the world: they are stupid magazines, even if those who read them love cinema and do so sincerely.

You don't even think that there is a link between the fecundity of cinema and the fecundity of theory?

No, I think it is rather the contrary. I mean that the theory of cinema was born in a moment when cinema already began to be in crisis, to produce an ever greater number of 'metacinematographic' works, like those of Godard – works that reflect on the death of cinema, works that already have something semiologic within themselves. In order for an art to become semiologic, self-reflective, it is necessary that it already be at its end, that it be an old art. I believe therefore that it is no accident that the theory of cinema was born in a moment when cinema already began to feel it was dead, to fold itself back into its past, to become commemorative …

Like theory on silent films today?

Exactly. I believe that the theory of cinema is more linked to the death of cinema than to its vitality.

Despite this, twenty years after your statement 'The time has come for a semiotics of the cinema', do you think it is necessary to continue to apply semiology to cinema?[17]

Yes, absolutely. It is necessary to continue.

Translated from Italian by Barringer Fifield

About the authors

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17 The reference is to the closing sentence of Metz's 'The Cinema: Language or Language System?', p. 91.

and Consumption of Digital Goods' (2014), 'Selection and Evolution in Narrative Ecosystems: A Theoretical Framework for Narrative Prediction' (with V. Innocenti and P. Brembilla, 2014), 'Information Architecture in Contemporary Television Series' (with V. Innocenti, 2012), and 'Changing Series: Narrative Models and the Role of the Viewer in Contemporary Television Seriality' (with V. Innocenti, 2014). He is currently president of the Italian Academic Association of Film and Television Teachers (Consulta Universitaria del Cinema).

About the translator

Barringer Fifield is a graduate of Stanford University in California and La Sapienza University of Rome. In addition to translating, he has written historical 'interpretations' of cities like St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Naples, and Rome.