

The semiological paradigm and Christian Metz's 'cinematographic' thought

Le paradigme sémiologique et la pensée 'cinématographique' de Christian Metz

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Il y a deux façons de subvertir la légalité du savoir (inscrite dans l'institution): ou le disperser ou le donner. Metz choisit de donner; la manière dont il traite un problème [...] est toujours généreuse: non par l'invocation d'idées 'humaines', mais par la sollicitude incessante dont il entoure le lecteur. (Roland Barthes 1975)

(There are two ways of subverting the legality of knowledge (inscribed in the Institution): either to disperse it or to give it. Metz chooses to give; the way in which he treats a problem ... is always generous: not by the invocation of "human" ideas, but by his incessant sollicitude for the reader.)

After the war Christian Metz organised a film club in his home town Béziers, studied classical philology in Paris, translated books on jazz and film noir from German and English into French, and published a herbarium; he was Georges Sadoul's assistant, a student and companion of Roland Barthes', and Professor at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris—his entire life he was a passionate filmgoer, and with his semiology of film created a theoretical model which testifies to his complex, dynamic thought and fundamentally shaped modern film theory.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the death of Christian Metz (1931–1993), the University of Zurich is holding a conference—as an homage to one of the founders of modern film theory and as a historical and epistemological reflection on the function of the semiological paradigm for an examination of film and cinema since the 1960s.

With his work, Christian Metz not only established film studies as a scholarly discipline and contributed to its academic institutionalisation, but also had a lasting influence on the theory and analysis of audiovisual images both inside and outside France. Apart from repeated polemics against the linguistically inspired terms and (frequently misunderstood) concepts of semiology or semiotics, this theoretical paradigm (as a body of theory) is nowadays seldom explicitly resorted to. Nonetheless: with his film semiology, as based on 'phenomenological structuralism,' Christian Metz proposed numerous concepts about the workings of film as a complex system and developed a structural model of analysis, which approached cinema systematically and for the first time from the 'outside'—especially via linguistics and later psychoanalysis—, those disciplines therefore which in his view took an interest in meaning as such. His exploration of the specificity of the filmic medium is characterised by a stringent, analytical thought which questions and makes as transparent as possible its own preconditions.

A complementary counterpart to this is his no less rigorous, analogical procedure of comparing objects and art forms (film, photography, painting, literature, and music), of structures (film vs language), and methods. This comparative method leads Christian Metz via a differentiated, 'negative' description of film's processual nature to a more comprehensive theoretical model: Film does *not* function *like* verbal language, and *differently from* literature, painting, or photography. As such, his interest lies in the structures as well as in the aesthetic and phenomenological surfaces of audiovisual images, the manifold expressive materials of film and their interaction in the construction of signification and narration; from the beginning, this

included questions about the relationship between convention and style, or about the 'source' of film and its addressing the viewers. Without ever losing touch with his object—cinema and films—or with analysis, through his method of proceeding he constitutes film theory as a descriptive and systematic model.

Thus, film semiology provided the impetus for the narratology of film, for semio-pragmatics, as well as for historical pragmatics and, within the field of applied analysis, for media pedagogy. It was the (critical) reference point for English-language feminist film theory and for the psychoanalysis of cinema, and many subsequent approaches to film aesthetics and film-philosophy would have been unthinkable without it.

By also studying writings on cinema and film from previous decades (from the 1920s in France, Germany and Russia to Bazin and the filmologists of the 1940s and 50s), Christian Metz also laid the foundation for a historicised reflection on film and cinema and hence to the historical theory of the medium or to a historiography of theory.

Accordingly, the conference is devoted to the historical and theoretical position of Christian Metz's works and their sphere of influence. Our aim is to approach his thought and the paradigm of film semiology—or even the theoretical paradigm as such—on a metatheoretical level and to situate it within the contemporary intellectual context. This is meant in the sense of an 'experimental epistemology' not in search of interpretations and explanations, but as a sketching of possible relationships with the purpose of comprehending the contingent parallels, connections and debates of a particular era and the development and reception of an intellectual model—the intellectual model of a scholar whose dynamic and multifaceted work still offers numerous points of departure.

Possible conference topics may include (the list is far from being comprehensive):

- a historical, theoretical and epistemological classification of Christian Metz's works (or of several aspects of his works) within the interdisciplinary, (post-)structuralist context of the 1960s to 90s
- the connections between Metz's thought and that of individual theorists within and outside of film (André Bazin, Albert Laffay, Jean Mitry et al.; Pier Paolo Pasolini; Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss et al.)
- the relationships between the paradigm of film semiology and phenomenological approaches (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre), aesthetics (Mikel Dufrenne, Pierre Francastel), psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan), cultural theory (Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco) or political theory/philosophy (Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault)
- the dissociation from the political-intellectual, ideological context: semiology as a 'depoliticised' theoretical approach, or the issue of political stance in the semiological paradigm
- the problem of the subject in Metz's theory: ranging from the materialist, 'anti-humanist,' textual approach to aspects of 'authorship' and style to the metapsychology of the viewer or the 'subject' of theory
- the relationship of system and analogy of the comparative method in Christian Metz's thought
- the significance of the theoretical paradigm for a reflection on film and cinema and the

relationship between theory and analysis

- the pertinence of theory to cinema history and to the history of film theory
- on parallel developments in Metz's work and the change from linguistic approaches towards a pragmatics: from sign to code, text, discourse, and enunciation
- on misunderstandings concerning the metaphor of 'film as language'
- on the reception and individual conceptual links and tensions in the different theoretical contexts in Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain, or the USA
- on the reception of the paradigm of film semiology by feminist theory and generally of 'French Theory'
- on the influence of the semiological paradigm on the further development of film theory, on other approaches
- on the topicality of Christian Metz's work in today's theoretical discourse—as well as in secondary and academic education

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Conference languages are French and English (without translation).