



CHRISTIAN METZ AND THE CODES OF CINEMA

FILM SEMIOLOGY AND BEYOND

EDITED BY MARGRIT TRÖHLER AND GUIDO KIRSTEN



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20. Thirty Years After

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Almost thirty years have passed since I had the privilege of interviewing Christian Metz in Bologna, where he was participating in a conference. The esteemed scholar had enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed for the first issue of a new cinema journal, *Cinegrafie*, produced exclusively by young people. My friend Guglielmo Pescatore and I had drafted an outline of ten questions, then I went to the appointment alone because I spoke French well. During our meeting, Metz talked with such ever-growing enthusiasm and generosity that the ten diligently formulated queries were swallowed up in a passionate conversation full of graciousness and the pleasure of communication. When I asked him a short time after the interview if he wanted to review the transcription I had prepared for publication, he confirmed his amiability by responding that he did not need to see it because he trusted that it was all right. When he received the journal, he was even more generous, promoting it among his students at his – for us young people in Italy legendary – seminar at the EHESS. He continued to promote all the issues we sent him by mail from Bologna to Paris.

Reading the interview again today, almost thirty years after, three points – among many – stand out.

The first is the humanity of Christian Metz, evident in every one of his answers, where the fragrance of life is never absent. He often evokes sentiments, especially of love: for the persons he had the chance to meet, for the beauty of those experiences he had the chance to have. But also love as a metaphor for the dynamics that distinguish the intellectual experience of the scholar and the theoretician, even if he finally comes to deny its significance. All that with the modesty and openness to self-criticism that characterize great figures.

The second is the *longue durée* of the Bazinian matrix of his thought, of which he was perhaps only partly aware. He was conscious of it in relation to the first phase of his semiologic reflection concerning analogy and language

without code. Perhaps he was not as aware of it in relation to another noted phase of his thought, the one concerning enunciation in classical cinema without marks of enunciation, which was ostensibly inspired by Emile Benveniste but was very similar to the considerations of André Bazin on invisible montage. It was no accident that Metz used the term 'transparency' (a term that is commonly attributed to Bazin, though Bazin never used it), even as he accused himself alone, with his constant intellectual honesty, for overusing the term.

The third is the equivalence of structuralism and theoretical approach, almost as if they were synonymous – as if structuralism was not a method or a model (something that Metz once again denies having ever proposed) but rather an approach, an intellectual attitude. For Christian Metz, semiology is an attitude, an attitude in opposition to approximation, to impressionism, to the slapdash mode dominating writing about cinema at that time. In his words, even the history of cinema, handled methodically with a theoretical attitude, becomes a structuralist history of cinema. And this is to be welcomed.

It is important to remember how much it was still necessary in those years to defend not only the legitimacy of cinema as an object of study but also the study of cinema itself, especially when conducted with a scientific approach analogous to that which the academic world recognized only for other forms of art. This was perhaps the most important battle Christian Metz fought, with farseeing clarity and inventiveness (even going to the point of soliciting the invention of new formulas of textual analysis that foreshadow hypertext and multi-media tools).

It was a battle that Christian Metz has certainly won.

Translated from Italian by Barringer Fifield

About the author

Elena Dagrada is Professor of Cinema Studies at the Università degli Studi di Milano. She was a member of the Executive Committee of DOMITOR (the international association for the study of early cinema) from 1993 to 1997, for which she wrote the second edition of the *International Bibliography on Early Cinema* (1995), and is currently President of the Italian Association for Research in Cinema History (AIRSC). Among her books are: *Woody Allen. Manhattan* (1996), where she also employs Christian Metz's Grand Syntagmatique; *Le varianti trasparenti: I film con Ingrid Bergman di Roberto*

Rossellini (2005), winner of the Limina Prize for the Best Italian Film Studies Book and published in a second enlarged edition in 2008; and *Between the Eye and the World: The Emergence of the Point-of-View Shot* (2014). She also authored the lemma “Piano-sequenza” (*Treccani Cinema Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV, 2004) comparing André Bazin and Christian Metz’s *plan-séquence* conception.

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.