

EARLY FILM SEMIOTICS AND
THE CINEMATIC SIGN

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the early attempts to extend semiotic theory to the study of the cinema, concentrating on the problem of the cinematic sign. The contributions of Christian Metz, Peter Wollen and Umberto Eco are discussed. Metz employs the language-based semiology of Saussure, whose conceptual framework is based on the arbitrary, conventional linguistic sign. Such a semiotic scheme cannot accommodate visual signs such as the cinematic image, which is considered to be motivated and natural. The language analogy encourages an identification of the semiotic sign with the linguistic sign, forcing Metz's semiotics to exclude the image as a basis for semiotic study. Wollen reassesses the nature of the image in light of Peirce's sign trichotomy of icon, index and symbol, which is based on the sign's relationship to its object. According to Peirce, a sign may be composed of all three sign aspects. Wollen argues that the image can be treated semiotically insofar as it is recognized to have symbolic or conventional as well as natural dimensions. Eco departs both from the language-based semiology of Saussure and from Peirce's idea that visual signs are naturally motivated by their object. He argues that all signs are conventional, and yet need not strictly resemble the linguistic sign. With Eco's contribution, the image can be considered a sign of the cinema. Semiotics appears to be a valid approach to the study of the cinema once semiotic signs are not identified with linguistic signs and visual signs are not identified with nature.

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INTRODUCTION

Cinematography is, first and foremost, montage.

--Sergei Eisenstein, 1929

Things are. Why manipulate them?

--Roberto Rossellini, 1959

The introduction of semiotics to cinema studies is taken by many to signal the advent of contemporary film theory.¹ According to Gianetti,² semiotic approaches to film study appeared in part as a response to the eclecticism and subjectivity stemming from the growing influence of the journalistic and popular film criticism of the 60s, which in turn was a response to the growing dissatisfaction with classical film theory. Prior to the semiotic movement, film theory could be divided reasonably cleanly into two schools: formalism and realism,³ a division that also roughly corresponds chronologically to the silent and sound movie

¹For example, Noel Carroll, *Mystifying Movies* (New York: Columbus University Press, 1988).

²L. Gianetti, *Understanding Movies* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1987) 391.

³Gianetti 362.

periods.⁴ A brief description of these schools of thought will be useful here.

The body of theoretical work surrounding the cinema is surprisingly large for an art-form less than a century old.⁵ One reason for this may be that the cinema was born self-consciously; like photography before it, film had to prove that it was an art-form, and not simply a recording device. Legitimization became a first task of theory.⁶ In what Noel Carroll calls the silent film paradigm,⁷ cinema suffered birth pains similar--and linked--to those photography had experienced 50 years earlier: the criticism that the simple reproduction of physical reality could not constitute true art.

In a debate that centred on the very nature of art and its relation to reality (and which can be traced back to the earliest of critics, Plato), cinema became defensive. For an art-form that had yet to prove itself an art, it is not surprising that formalist theories came to be associated with a fledgling cinema. If art did not reside in the mere

⁴Tim Bywater, and Thomas Sobchack, *Film Criticism* (New York: Longman, 1989) 166.

⁵Noel Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 4.

⁶Carroll 4.

⁷Carroll 4.

reproduction of reality, then for cinema to be art, it must reside in the manner in which it is *unlike* reality. The *limitations* of the medium were emphasized: its two dimensionality and monochromaticity, its confining frame, its fragmented space-time continuum.⁸ Its unprecedented power to reproduce physical reality were downplayed; the shot was subordinated to the cut. Montage became synonymous with the cinema itself. "Reality" was denigrated to the status of "raw material"; art, in order to exist, must reside in the *manipulation* of reality. Eisenstein's work, most notably his 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*, is most characteristic of this movement. In the silent-film paradigm, cinematic art struggled to become plastic.

A revealing characteristic of the formalist school was its reluctance, if not steadfast refusal, to accept the advent of sound and other fidelity-enhancing technological advancements. Eisenstein, a foremost exponent of the formalist position and its most accomplished film-maker, coauthored a manifesto endorsing only an asynchronous or contrapuntal use of sound: "The first experimental work with sound must be directed along the line of its distinct non-

⁸Gianetti 370.

synchronization with the visual images."⁹ Arnheim, the school's other great theorist, summed up the formalist position in 1933 in *Film as Art*, in which he argued that the introduction of sound signalled the death of cinematic art:

The introduction of sound film must be considered as the imposition of a technical novelty that did not lie on the path the best film artists were pursuing. They were engaged in working out an explicit and pure style of silent film, using its restrictions to transform the peep show into art. The introduction of sound film smashed many of the forms that the film artists were using in favour of the inartistic demand for the greatest possible 'naturalness'.¹⁰

Its easy to laugh now at these seemingly naive prognostications and futile attempts to resist technology, but to the formalist film makers and theoreticians, the perceived threat that synchronous sound posed to a cinema in which manipulation was supreme was indeed real.

The realists, in contrast, embraced the sound cinema and any technology that enhanced the fidelity with which film could record reality--a feature, they believed, was the essence of the medium. By the 1920s, synchronized sound had become a reality, and realist theories, which saw art in an accurately reproduced external world, proliferated. The

⁹Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Alexandrov. "Manifesto for Orchestral Counterpoint," in *Zhizn Iskusstva* (Leningrad), no. 32, Aug. 1928. Reprinted as "A Statement," in *Film Form*. Ed. and trans. Jay Leyda. (New York, 1949) 257-260.

¹⁰Rudolf Arheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 154.

theorists and film makers of the sound-paradigm¹¹ celebrated the features of the cinema that the formalists denounced. They eschewed all artifice, insofar as that was possible, minimizing filmic manipulation, narrative structure, and excessive montage. According to Andre Bazin, widely considered the preeminent realist film theorist, film, as well as photography, is unique because of its ability to record reality directly, with minimal human intervention. The cinema is art not because of what it adds to reality but what it reveals of reality.¹² The photographic image, whose importance now eclipsed montage, is not simply raw material, but an objective representation of the past, a veritable slice of reality.¹³ The subject-matter of the film became all-important as technique strove for transparency. The rapid cutting, close-ups, and static camera of the formalists gave way to the long take, long shot, and mobile camera--an attempt to reproduce true time, true context, and true movement.¹⁴ The deep-focus shot, so admired by Bazin, is nearly emblematic of the movement.

¹¹Carroll 4.

¹²Bywater 168.

¹³Carroll. *Mystifying Movies* 3.

¹⁴Bywater 168.

The preoccupation with reproducing or "capturing" reality was obviously well-suited to the documentary film form, which burgeoned at this time between the wars. The realist movement found its fullest expression in the neo-realist films of post-war Italy. Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) and De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) typify this movement's commitment to heavy realism, light plot, and socialist sentiment.¹⁵

Marxian, feminist, and especially auteur¹⁶ theories proliferated in the '60s. Popular journalistic criticism grew in stature with the eloquent voices of James Agee and Pauline Kael. Structuralist and semiotic theories found an easy reception amid this theoretical overabundance. By the '70s, what has been called the "first semiotics"¹⁷ dominated the field. It was based on the principles of structural linguistics, which were developed at the turn of the century by the Swiss language scholar Ferdinand de Saussure. Its pretence to science and success in other

¹⁵David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: Norton) 380-3.

¹⁶Auteur theory was popularized in the 1950s by the contributors to the french journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, in particular, Francois Truffaut. It emphasized the creative role of the director (auteur) in the development of film art, seeking thematic and stylistic unities--the auteur's "signature"--in the entire corpus of a director's work.

¹⁷Carroll. *Mystifying Movies* 4.

fields such as literature and cultural anthropology, its thoroughgoing cultural approach, and its emphasis on system, structure and codes seemed eminently suited to address many of the perceived problems with classical film theory.

But the attempt to develop a semiotics of the cinema based on the principles of Saussure--and with it its chief champion, Christian Metz--met with immediate critical attack. In its adherence to the principles of structural linguistics, in its preoccupation with filmic denotation, and in its inability to deal with ideology, Metz's film semiotics, introduced in 1964 with his controversial essay "The Cinema: Language or Language System?", was deemed ill-conceived. In 1977, Metz published *Le Signifiant Imaginaire*,¹⁸ which attempted a synthesis of his earlier work with the concepts of neo-Freudianism and Lacan. In what may be called the "second semiotics," in which subject positioning and ideology became the prevailing concern, linguistic notions took a back seat to Althusserian Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Barthesian literary criticism.¹⁹

¹⁸Christian Metz, *Le Signifiant Imaginaire: Psychoanalyse et Cinema* (Paris: Union Generale d'Editions, 1977). *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

¹⁹Carroll, *Mystifying Movies* 5.

This thesis explores some of the philosophical and theoretical issues attending the development of what I have called the "first semiotics." A concentration on the early attempts to absorb film theory into semiotics is justified on several counts: First, insofar as the work in this period is recognized as the pioneering attempt to extend semiotics to film theory, its examination best serves to throw the fundamental philosophical and theoretical issues regarding the sign and the semiotic project into relief. Second, by its attempt to *justify* a semiotic approach to what is primarily a non-verbal form of communication, this work can be seen as a test case for the possibility of a general science of signs. Third, as the ground-work for semiotic film theory, and the point of departure for the "second semiotics," it continues to be the object of sustained critical attention.²⁰

Semiotics is the study of signs. In order for there to be a semiotics of the cinema, one would therefore assume, film must have something to do with signs or sign systems. This raises an issue not at all as naive as it may appear to anyone committed to semiotic theory. The realist cinematic perspective, for instance, which on many accounts still dominates contemporary film theory and production, has

²⁰Brian Henderson, "Metz: Essais I and Film Theory" *Film Quarterly* (Vol. 28, No.3) 15.

always resisted semiotic theory. It rejects the claim that the cinema is essentially or fundamentally a matter of signs, codes or language. The cinema, insofar as the basis of the art is photochemical reproduction, is in fact unique among communicative media because it doesn't use signs to convey its meaning: it uses reality, or an analogue of reality, itself. The question of signs in the cinema, then, becomes fundamental to the establishment of a semiotics of the cinema. It is also a fundamental philosophical question, insofar as it raises the issue of the relationship between reality and this particular art form. The question can be posed in terms of the nature of the cinematic image, which is often taken as the constituent element of film. What is the image? Is it a sign? If not, is a semiotics of film possible? If it is a sign, what sort? What form need a semiotics assume to accomodate the peculiarities of this art form?

The question of signs in the cinema, more than any other, dominated the early efforts to develop a semiotics of the cinema. This thesis addresses this question with respect to the theories of Christian Metz, Peter Wollen and Umberto Eco, each of whom has contributed to the development of early film semiotics. Particular attention is paid to their conceptions of the sign, the traditions from which these

conceptions arose, and the problems that such conceptions pose for a semiotics of the cinema.

It is my contention that a semiotics of the cinema is viable only if it departs from a strict adherence to Saussure's principles of structural linguistics and abandons a realist conception of the cinematic image. Chapter 1 investigates Christian Metz's initial attempts to apply a Saussurean linguistic model to the cinema. I show how the inadequacies of the language model and a realist conception of the image lead Metz to develop a semiotics of filmic narrative and to abandon the image as a potential sign of the cinema. Chapter 2 introduces the film semiotics of Peter Wollen, who applies the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce in an effort to remedy the problems in Metz's approach. Peirce's sign trichotomy of icon, index and symbol is applied to film in an attempt to accord the image a more prominent place in film semiotics. Chapter 3 introduces Umberto Eco's contribution to film semiotics. Eco's unique synthesis of the work of Saussure and Peirce is presented as pointing a way out of many of the problems of early film semiotics.

Though it will doubtless be required some day to change its character, semiology must first of all, if not exactly take definite shape, at least try itself out, explore its possibilities and impossibilities. This is feasible only on the basis of preparatory investigation. And indeed it must be acknowledged in advanced that such an investigation is both diffident and rash: diffident because semiological knowledge at present can only be a copy of linguistic knowledge; rash because this knowledge must be applied forthwith, at least as a project, to non-linguistic objects.¹

--Roland Barthes, 1964

Chapter 1

CHRISTIAN METZ AND THE SAUSSUREAN SIGN

Critical assessment of Metz's contribution to film theory varies from scathing disavowal to respectful commendation. He is nevertheless consistently credited with inaugurating the semiotic approach to film theory with his essay, "Le Cinema: Langue ou Langage?"² This 1964 essay was the first explicit attempt to assess the validity of a linguistic analogy that had been implicit in film theory and

¹Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968) 11.

²Revised in 1968 as Chapter 3 in *Essais sur la signification au cinema*, Vol. I; translated in 1974 as "The Cinema: Language or Language System?" in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), hereafter *FL*.

practice since the birth of cinema. The loose and unscientific use of this metaphor, Metz argues, has led to more obfuscation than clarification. If the concept of language is to be used at all, he said, it must be considered in light of its proper science, that is, linguistics.

The question that Metz asks--Is cinema a language or a language system?--is posed in terms of the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who, at the turn of the century, conceived of a general science of signs that was based on his principles of structural linguistics. Saussure called this proposed science semiology.³ So in asking this question, "language or language system?", Metz was not simply attempting to establish the proper place of the language analogy in cinema studies. He was attempting something far more significant: To create a semiotics of the cinema. In so doing, Metz was extending the frontiers of semiotic theory by applying a language-based conceptual

³The term "semiology" refers to the continental, language-based study of signs descending from Saussure through Barthes. In 1969, the term "semiotics", used to describe work on signs that departed from the language model (in particular the tradition descending from Peirce), became the accepted standard, covering both senses. (International Association for Semiotic Studies, Paris, 1969.) Here, the term semiotics will thus be used throughout, except in specific reference to the work of Saussure or Barthes, in which case the term semiology is more appropriate.

scheme to an essentially non-verbal form of expression,⁴ and at the same time challenging the legitimacy of the entire tradition of classical film theory.

Metz's fidelity to the ideas of Saussure is notable, and it sets the tone for this long and seminal paper. *Is the cinema a language in anything more than a figurative sense? Has the cinema a langue (language system) as verbal language does? If not, is it amenable to Saussurean methods, for which langue is the object of analysis? To paraphrase Metz: Can the study of film--at a time when linguistics itself, faithful in general to Saussure, is mainly concerned with language systems--have a linguistic dimension? Metz's answer is yes, the "filmolinguistic" venture is entirely justified, and further "that it must be fully 'linguistic'--that is to say, solidly based on linguistics itself." At the same time, however, he rejects the idea of a cinematographic langue. Metz's problem is how to apply a language-based semiotics to a form of expression that differs from language in fundamental respects.*

⁴The cinema began as a non-verbal form of communication. The addition of sound augmented the cinematic art by allowing the incorporation of verbal language into its message. It is arguable, however, that the reproduction of moving images--the image track--remains the essential and characteristic means of cinematic expression.

⁵FL 50.

"The Cinema: Language or Language System?" can be considered a semiotic reformulation of the larger theoretical question posed by Andre Bazin in his 1959 work, *What is cinema?*⁶ For Metz, this question was fundamental, because upon it balanced the very possibility of a semiotics of the cinema. If the cinema was not in some sense like a language, the very possibility of film semiotics was threatened. After a detailed and convoluted examination of the relation between language and the cinema, Metz arrives at his conclusion. The cinema is *un langage sans langue*: a language without a language system. An understanding of the significance of this conclusion requires an introduction to Saussure's thought on structural linguistics and semiology.

Saussure's Semiology

Saussure distinguished himself from his contemporaries by his determination to develop a science of language that was unique and independent of other sciences that had traditionally dealt with language phenomena, such as psychology, anthropology, prescriptive grammar, philology, etc. An authentic linguistics, he believed--one that would

⁶Andre Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinema?* (Paris, 1959). *What is Cinema?* Vols I,II, trans. H. Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

reveal the true nature of language--must have its own object of analysis. In his *Cours de Linguistique Generale* (*Course in General Linguistics*)⁷ Saussure explains that the unique character of language is not to be found in its historical development or in its various spoken manifestations, but rather in the linguistic *structure* that exists collectively in the social body that shares a common language. Language structure is a sociocultural repository of linguistic signs, a "fund accumulated by the members of the community through the practise of speech, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain..."⁸ Saussure calls this aspect of language *la langue* (language system), which is the essence of language (*le langage*) and the proper object of linguistic analysis. He distinguishes *la langue* from *la parole* (speech), which is the concrete material utterance of sounds. Thus language in general (*le langage*) is comprised of *langue* and *parole*. A language system exists as a static or *synchronic* state. It should be studied independently of historical (*diachronic*) considerations. The historical study of language, or diachronic linguistics, though it remains a subject worthy of inquiry, engages a heterogenous ensemble

⁷Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Generale* (1916). *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986).

⁸Saussure 13.

of facts and necessarily enlists the support of sciences extrinsic to linguistics. Linguistics proper must be synchronic. It should be concerned solely with *langue*, with the system of signs and their interrelationships at a given point in time. For Saussure, the distinctions between synchrony and diachrony and between *langue* and *parole* are absolute.⁹

These distinctions hinge on Saussure's innovative conception of the linguistic sign. In part, Saussure's project is a reaction to a "nomenclaturist" view of language. On this view, words derive their signification from the objects to which they refer. (A language, then, becomes a lexicon of labels.) Saussure rejects this view as naive, and instead posits the linguistic sign (which is not to be identified with the word, but with the minimal unit of signification) as a relation between a sound pattern (signifier) and a concept (signified).¹⁰ Two points to keep in mind here are that the relationship between signifier and signified is *arbitrary*, and that the signified is *not a thing or a referent* but a concept or a signification. These

⁹Saussure 83,19.

¹⁰Saussure 66. Saussure emphasizes that both the concept and the sound pattern are psychological entities. "The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses."

two features of the linguistic sign as conceived by Saussure, its arbitrariness and its exclusion of the object or "thing" from the sign relation, figure prominently in the problems Metz encounters in the attempt to develop a semiotics of the cinema.

The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is the first principle of structural linguistics: "The principle is the organizing principle for the whole of linguistics, considered as a science of language structure."¹¹ It is tied intimately to Saussure's notion of linguistic value. On a nomenclaturist view of language, signs derive their identity from the things to which they refer. But on a structuralist model, the object is irrelevant to linguistic value by virtue of the arbitrariness of the sign:

For a language is a system of pure values, determined by nothing else apart from the temporary state of its constituent elements. Insofar as a value, in one of its aspects, is founded upon natural connexions between things (as, for example, in economics the value of a piece of land depends on the income derivable from it), it is possible up to a point to trace this value through time, bearing in mind that it depends at any one time upon the relevant system of contemporary values. However, its connection with things inevitably supplies it with a natural basis, and hence any assessment of it is never entirely arbitrary...But, as we have already seen, in linguistics these natural connexions have no place.¹²

¹¹Saussure 68.

¹²Saussure 80-1.

For a synchronic language state, the value of a linguistic sign derives solely from its relationship to other signs in the system. Moreover, since the sign has no naturally given positive identity, its value depends on the purely formal *differences* that distinguish one sign from the others. Thus the value of the sign is *differentially determined*: "...in a language there are only differences, and no positive terms."¹³ "In a language, as in every semiological system, what distinguishes a sign is what constitutes it, nothing more."¹⁴

Linguistic value makes possible meaning or signification.¹⁵ The linguistic sign or unit "signifies" by virtue of an arbitrary identification between a sound pattern and a concept, each of which is differentially determined. Combinations of two or more units Saussure calls *syntagms*. Syntagmatic relations exist among signs that are present in a linear sequence, contiguous units in the spoken chain. Syntagmatic relations exist *in praesentia*. Saussure contrasts syntagmatic relations with *associative* relations (often called *paradigmatic* relations by Saussure's

¹³Saussure 118.

¹⁴Saussure 119.

¹⁵I follow Kindem's clarification of Saussure's rather obscure discussion of meaning and value. G.A.Kindem, *Toward a Semiotic Theory of Visual Communication in the Cinema* (New York: Arno Press, 1980) 16-7.

followers). Paradigmatic relations exist between units that are present in the spoken chain and units that are absent. They are based on associations in the mind of the language-user. Paradigmatic relations exist *in absentia*. Both kinds of relations are essential for linguistic meaning.

Saussure's conception of semiology is based on a language model of signification:

It is therefore possible to conceive of a science that studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence part of general psychology. We shall call it semiology...It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge.¹⁶

Thus Saussure conceived of semiology as a general science "which studies the role of signs as part of social life." Language is one such system, and its proper science is linguistics. But the relationship between linguistics and semiology as adumbrated here is problematic. Many commentators have criticized the primacy accorded to language in Saussure's theory of semiology and the apparent inconsistency of a linguistics at once serving as a model

¹⁶Saussure 15-17.

for, and a province, of semiology.¹⁷ Roland Barthes responded to the problem by declaring linguistics to be not a part of semiology but semiology to be a part of linguistics.¹⁸ With Barthes, verbal language was given a central role in all other forms of signification. (Metz's work on film reflects this emphasis on language; the semiotic principles as outlined in *Film Language* are derived from Barthes's early work, especially his *Elements of Semiology*.) Others responded to the relation between linguistics and semiology, perhaps more justifiably, with critiques of "glottocentrism", arguing that a language-based semiology is ill-equipped to deal with the totality of social signification.

The problem with identifying semiology with linguistics becomes more apparent in the following passage from the *Course*:

It may be noticed in passing that when semiology is established one of the questions that must be asked is whether modes of expression which rely upon signs that are entirely natural (mime, for example) fall within the province of semiology. If they do, the main object of study will nonetheless be the class of systems based upon the arbitrary nature of the sign...We may therefore say that signs which are entirely arbitrary convey better than others the ideal semiological process. That is why the most complex and the most widespread of all systems of expression, which is the one we

¹⁷Kindem 14.

¹⁸Barthes 11.

find in human languages, is also the most characteristic of all. *In this sense, linguistics serves as a model for the whole of semiology, even though languages represent only one type of semiological system.*¹⁹ (my italics)

Several of Saussure's assumptions in this passage have dramatically influenced the path of continental semiology. First, the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign becomes a general semiological principle: all signs share the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. Second, the arbitrary is associated with the conventional, and the motivated is associated with the natural. This latter point is made more clear in Saussure's discussion of the symbol:

The word *symbol* is sometimes used to designate the linguistic sign, or more exactly that part of the linguistic sign we are calling the signal [i.e., the signifier]. The use of the word symbol is awkward, for reasons connected with our first principle. For it is characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary. They are not empty configurations. They show at least a vestige of natural connexion between the signal and signification. For instance, our symbol of justice, the scales, could hardly be replaced by a chariot.²⁰

Saussure comments on the meaning of the term arbitrary: "It must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker...The term implies simply that the signal is *unmotivated*: that is to say arbitrary in relation

¹⁹Saussure 68.

²⁰Saussure 68.

to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality."²¹ The identification of the motivated with the natural is explicit.

A third related assumption is that the natural sign (in Saussure's terms, the symbol) does not belong to semiology. This follows from the principle of arbitrariness. Thus motivation, which obtains, for Saussure, only through a "natural connexion in reality," is excluded from semiology. The rigid dichotomy between the arbitrary and the natural and between the conventional and the motivated, as well as the exclusion of the object or referent characterizes most of continental semiology.

Saussure also emphasized the *linear character* of the linguistic signal, which has to do with the temporal aspect of speech, and distinguished it from the visual sign, which can exploit more than one dimension simultaneously.²² It becomes clear that a general theory of signs in which arbitrary signs "convey better than others the ideal semiological process" will encounter serious difficulties when attempting to deal with forms of signification that involve natural and visual signs.

²¹Saussure 68-69.

²²Saussure 70. The linear character is the second principle of structural linguistics, and "its importance equals that of the first law."

The Cinema: Language or Language System?

According to Metz, the cinema is one such form of signification. The project of film semiotics is thus to accommodate the signs of the cinema and to address the problems arising out of the application of a language-based semiotic theory to what is primarily a nonverbal form of signification. But it is *precisely his commitment to the principles of structural linguistics that handicaps Metz's attempt to develop a semiotics of the cinema*. The Saussurean legacy of excluding motivated, natural and visual signs, combined with an apparent realist tendency on the part of Metz (which will be discussed in the context of Metz's critique of Eisenstein), conspire to create a semiotics that is unable to deal properly with the signs of the cinema.

An examination of the principle arguments in "Le Cinema: Langue ou Langage?" will serve to make this point clearer. Metz discusses the relationship between semiotics and linguistics at several points in the essay. "In theory," he says, "linguistics is only a branch of semiotics, but in fact semiotics was created from linguistics."²³ And, "semiotics can and must depend heavily on linguistics, but

²³FL 60.

it must not be confused with linguistics."²⁴ The problematic relationship between linguistics and semiotics inherited from Saussure encourages Metz to divide his project into two stages and to pose, at least initially, the question of "what is cinema?" in the negative:

To understand what film is not is to gain time, rather than to lose it, in the attempt to grasp what film is. The latter aim defines the second stage of film study. In practice the two stages are inseparable, for one always opens onto the other. I call one of them the "first stage" because it benefits from the capital of linguistics, which encourages one to begin with it. The "second stage" is properly semiological and translinguistic; it is less able to depend on previously acquired knowledge, so that, far from being helped, it must, on the contrary, participate--if it is able to--in work that is new. Thus it is condemned to suffer the present discomfort of semiotics.²⁵

Using the "capital of linguistics," Metz arrives at the conclusion that the cinema is not a langue. (It is "une langue sans langue.") That is, unlike verbal language, it does not have a language system, a "highly organized code,"²⁶ sharply distinct from its parole, its various messages. (Metz adopts Jakobson's revision of the

²⁴FL 40.

²⁵FL 61.

²⁶FL 40, fn.

langue/parole distinction in terms of code/message.²⁷⁾ Metz begins his demonstration of this with a critique of the concept of montage. He argues that montage theory is based on a mistaken conception of the cinema, due in part to a misuse of the language analogy. Metz's attack on montage, and formalist theory in general, reveals his realist bias. Metz later goes on to discuss the cinematic image, the nature of which makes a cinematic langue impossible. The image, according to Metz, is very different from the word, and this fundamental dissimilarity poses the greatest problems to the application of semiotics to the cinema.

Metz considers Eisenstein the leading theorist of what he calls the "montage-or-bust" ("montage-roi") approach.²⁸ Eisenstein's influence was so pervasive during the first decades of the century that montage became practically synonymous with the cinema itself. In keeping with the formalist approach, the celebrated Soviet director and theoretician devalued any element of meaning inhering in the shot and instead asserted the supremacy of montage (from the French, *monter*, to assemble), the sequential arrangements of shots. Metz paraphrases this approach:

²⁷L. Matejka, "Postscript. Prague School Semiotics," eds. Matejka, and Titunik. *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976) 276.

²⁸FL 31.

The isolated shot is not even a small fragment of cinema; it is only raw material, a photograph of the real world. Only by montage can one pass from photography to cinema, from slavish copy to art. Broadly defined, montage is quite simply inseparable from the composition of the work itself.²⁹

Metz places the montage-or-bust approach to film in the historical context of a modern "spirit of manipulation," an era of erector sets, electric trains and powdered milk, as well as cybernetics, information theory and structural linguistics.³⁰ He believes an analogy can be drawn between montage cinema and structural linguistics:

The natural object is considered as a simple point of departure. It is analyzed, literally and figuratively, and its constituent parts are isolated; this is the moment of *breakdown analysis*, as in the cinema. Then the parts are distributed into isofunctional categories...This is the paradigmatic aspect--and it is only preparatory, as was the filming of individual scenes for Eisenstein. The grand moment, which one has been waiting for and thinking about since the beginning, is the syntagmatic moment. One reassembles a duplicate of the original object, a duplicate which is perfectly grasped by the mind, since it is a pure product of the mind. It is the intelligibility of the object that is itself made into an object.

Metz is critical of a cinema which is "neither *poiesis* nor *pseudophysis*; but a simulation, a product of *techne*."³¹ For Metz, the cinema, because of the fidelity of the

²⁹FL 32.

³⁰FL 31-9.

³¹FL 36.

photographic process, is the "triumph of the pseudo-physis".³² Yet cultural and historical influences, Metz argues, are not adequate to explain why the "spirit of manipulation" found so accommodating a home in an art form whose very nature opposed it. There was something about the nature of film itself:

For the error was tempting. Seen from a certain angle, the cinema has all the appearances of what it is not. It is apparently a *kind of language* (*une sorte de langage*), but it was seen as something less, a specific language system (*une langue*). It allows, it even necessitates, a certain amount of cutting and montage; its organization, which is so manifestly syntagmatic, could only be derived, one believed, from some embedded paradigmatic category, even if this paradigmatic category was hardly known. Film is too obviously a message for one not to assume that it is coded.³³

The supremacy of montage was, erroneously for Metz, the triumph of the code.

Metz regards the montage-or-bust approach as a mistaken conception of the cinema, one that is based on a too-literal identification of film with verbal language: the shot is equated with the word, the sequence with the sentence. Thus Metz criticizes Eisenstein for taking too seriously the film-language analogy and in fact for treating the cinema as *if it were a langue*. He characterizes Eisenstein and other

³²FL 39.

³³FL 40.

proponents of montage as "cine-langue" theorists. This is an interesting criticism, given that it is unlikely that Eisenstein ever read Saussure, and it deserves further discussion.

Metz is cautious to point out that his critique of Eisenstein is not a matter of politics: it is a question only of semiotics. Film differs from verbal language: it is not a language system and should not be treated as if it were. Defenders of the montage cinema, whose films were great despite this commitment, were quite simply wrong. Yet it appears that Metz's critique of Eisenstein has less to do with linguistics and semiotics than it does with classical film theory, namely, the realist/formalist debate.

Metz does not fault Eisenstein merely for employing a linguistic model, but rather *how* he employed it. It is Eisenstein's identification of the shot with the word that Metz finds problematic. Eisenstein derogated the inherent value of the shot and concentrated on its juxtaposition with other shots along the filmic chain. He emphasized the abstract and intellectual aspects of cinematography. He repudiated naturalistic and realist cinema. Was Eisenstein not, in all this, asserting the arbitrariness of the cinematic image? Perhaps propelled by the Marxian call to dismantle the phenomenal surface reality in order to reveal underneath the historical and social mechanisms at work, was

Eisenstein not attempting to unmask the putatively "natural" connection between the image and its referent in reality? As Metz says: "The "montage or bust" approach...consisted in dismantling the immanent perception of things in order to reel it off in slices, which would become simple signs to be used wherever one pleased."³⁴

It can be argued that Eisenstein shares Metz's commitment to the Saussurean notion of the sign (paradoxically, given their opposing aesthetic stances). It was not the linguistic model that was the error, it was Eisenstein's treatment of the image--his identification of the cinematic image with the linguistic, arbitrary sign. It was, in fact, his treatment of the image as *the* cinematic sign. Eisenstein wrote:

Now why should the cinema follow the forms of theatre and painting rather than the methodology of language, which allows wholly new concepts of ideas to arise from the combination of two concrete denotations of two concrete objects? Language is much closer to film than painting is...So why not rather lean towards the system of language, which is forced to use the same mechanisms in inventing words and word-complexes...The differentiation in montage-pieces lies in their lack of existence as single units. Each piece can evoke no more than a certain association.³⁵

³⁴FL 42.

³⁵S. Eisenstein, "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form," *Film Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Mast, and Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Henderson argues that the language metaphor was less operative in Eisenstein than is

Metz, on the other hand, ultimately arrives at the conclusion that the cinema is not a langue precisely because of his belief that the cinematic image is not arbitrary. It is, therefore, according to Metz and the Saussurean tradition through Barthes, motivated. It is not coded, not conventional, and thus not a true sign at all. For Metz, the image cannot serve as the cinematic sign.

This appears to be a conclusion based less on semiology than on ontology. It follows from Metz's discovery of the fundamental dissimilarity between the cinema and verbal language, from which all the rest follows: *the cinema has nothing corresponding, not even metaphorically, to the second articulation of verbal language*. Here Metz uses Andre Martinet's³⁶ seminal idea that language is articulated on two levels. The "first articulation" is the level of morphemes or words, units with proper signification or meaning, which can be combined into meaningful utterances. The "second articulation" is the level of phonemes, the

commonly believed, and thus that Metz's argument on this point is "empty" (Henderson 23). Although Eisenstein's identification of the shot with the linguistic sign is not complete, I nevertheless have to agree with Metz's criticism of Eisenstein's logomorphism. See Eisenstein's collection of essays, *Film Form*, in particular "Film Language" and "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" for his several references to the language of cinema.

³⁶A. Martinet, *Elements of General Linguistics*, trans. Elisabeth Palmer (Chicago: University of California Press, 1960).

units of sound used to create words. Phonemes are distinctive units without proper signification. For example, the sounds 'p' or 'b' have no meaning. Only when they are articulated into morphemes do they become significant units, as for example in the words 'pig' or 'big'.³⁷

Thus in verbal language, any sentence can be analyzed into meaningful units (roughly, words) and these words can then be further analyzed into units without proper signification, that is, the phonemes. But in the cinema, Metz argues, there are no phonemes, i.e., no purely distinctive units without signification. An image, for example, of a infant in a mother's arms, cannot be analysed into units that have no proper signification: isolation of the "baby" will necessarily isolate both the signifier and signified "baby"; further analysis will not disclose anything resembling phonemic units. As Metz says: "it is impossible to break up the signifier without getting isomorphic segments of the significate [signified]".³⁸

³⁷The double articulation of verbal language accounts both for the economy of language: the ability to create great numbers of meaningful words from relatively few sounds; and its autonomy: the phoneme's lack of significance guarantees the arbitrariness of the sign. Martinet 23.

³⁸FL 63. Metz's translator, Michael Taylor, translated *signifie* as "significate". Established usage now prefers "signifier". The words should be taken as synonymous.

If the cinema has nothing corresponding to phonemes, neither does it have morphemes or words (the units of the first articulation). Criticizing the cine-langue theorist's identification of the image with the word, Metz argues that the image corresponds to one or more *sentences*, and a sequence of images is a complex segment of discourse.

The image is "sentence" less by its quantity of meaning (a concept too difficult to handle, especially in film) than by its assertive status. The image is *always actualized*. Moreover, even the image--fairly rare, incidentally--that might, because of its content, correspond to a "word" is still a sentence: This is a particular case, and a particularly revealing one. A close-up of a revolver does not mean "revolver" (a purely virtual lexical unit), but at the very least, and without speaking of connotations, it signifies "here is a revolver!"³⁹

For Metz, the image or shot is the smallest unit of film, but it is the smallest *poetic* unit, which as Jakobson says,⁴⁰ corresponds to the highest linguistic unit, the sentence. The image is therefore always *speech*, never a potential unit of a langue.

Metz's assertion that the cinema lacks a double articulation has many consequences. First, because there are no articulations below the level of the image, the cinema is characterized by a "poverty of paradigm":

³⁹FL 67.

⁴⁰Quoted in FL 66.

Only to a slight degree does the filmic image assume meaning in relation to the other images that could have occurred at the same point along the chain...Everything is present in film: hence the obviousness of film and also its opacity. The clarification of present by absent units occurs much less than in verbal language. The relationships *in praesentia* are so rich they render the strict organization of *in-absentia* relationships superfluous and difficult...A rich message with a poor code, or a rich text with a poor system, the cinematographic image is primarily speech. It is all assertion. The word, which is the unit of language, is missing; the sentence, which is the unit of speech, is supreme. The cinema can speak only in neologisms. Every image is a *hapax* [a unique determination].⁴¹

Unlike words, there are an infinite number of images and each is irreducibly unique; they are always *actualized*, and do not depend on absent units for their meaning. According to Metz, the poverty of the paradigm is the counterpart of a wealth of syntagmatic relations. There is a paradigmatic category, says Metz, but the commutable units are not phonemic, but are rather on the level of the *large signifying units*. (I discuss this important conclusion at a later point.) The various types of camera movements (rear and forward dolly, pan) or techniques of punctuation (dissolve, cut or fade) may also be considered paradigmatic categories.⁴²

⁴¹FL 69.

⁴²FL 71.

For Metz, the absence of the second articulation also means that in the cinema there are very few 'true' signs. The image does not share important characteristics of the linguistic sign, those characteristics that Saussure had made definitive of the semiological sign. Metz says:

The image is first and always an image. In its perceptual literalness it reproduces the signified spectacle whose signifier it is; and thus, it becomes what it shows, to the extent that it does not have to *signify it* (if we take the word in the sense of *signum facere*, the special making of a sign). There are many characteristics to the filmic image that distinguish it from the preferred form of signs--which is arbitrary, conventional, and codified. These are the consequences of the fact that *from the very first an image is not the indication of something other than itself, but the psuedopresence of the thing it contains.*⁴³ [italics mine]

For Metz, the filmic image, insofar as it is motivated by some "natural" connection between signifier and signified, is not a sign in the Saussurean sense of the term. Metz uses Michael Dufrenne's⁴⁴ distinction of *expression* and *signification* to distinguish the cinematic image from the arbitrary sign:

There is *expression* when a "meaning" is somehow immanent to a thing, is directly released from it, and merges with its very form... *Signification*, on the contrary, links from the outside an isolable signifier to a significate that is itself--and this has been known since Saussure--a concept and

⁴³FL 75-6.

⁴⁴M. Dufrenne, *Phenomenologie de l'experience esthetique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1953).

not a thing...A concept is signified; a thing is expressed...One is natural, the other conventional; one is global and continuous, the other divided into discrete units; one is derived from being and things, the other from ideas.⁴⁵

In the cinema, meaning is naturally derived from the signifier (i.e., the shot or image) alone, without resorting to a code or a cinematographic equivalent of a Saussurean langue. For Metz, the relationship between the image and the object is motivated; there is no transformation and no code. In his critique of Eisenstein, Metz also makes the distinction between expression (which is continuous, total, and without distinct signifiers, like "the expression of joy on the face of a child") and signification (which "tends to make precise slices of discontinuous *significates* corresponding to so many discrete signifiers").⁴⁶ He chastizes Eisenstein, who was not content with "the natural meaning of things," for not recognizing the distinction between expression and signification.

Metz's treatment of the image leads to an immediate problem with the identification of the cinematic sign. Metz is vague and ambiguous when it comes to identifying the signs of the cinema. This is an important point, given it is the task of semiotics to study signs. At times he treats the

⁴⁵FL 78.

⁴⁶FL 37.

image as if it were the cinematic sign, despite its being motivated and natural and thus not a true sign at all. With expression (as opposed to signification), the signifier is not arbitrarily associated with a concept but is motivated by an object or a thing. Metz suggests that Saussure's rejection of nomenclaturism in language does not obtain in the cinema. Photographs do not lie. They refer to actual things and states of affairs. When discussing the photographic image, however, Metz continues to use the Saussurean distinctions of signifier/signified, syntagm/paradigm, and langue/parole (code/message), despite Saussure's insistence that these distinctions rely on the arbitrariness and linearity of the sign.

But Metz is *ultimately compelled to discard the image as the cinematic sign. Metz's notion of expression is strictly incompatible with the principles of a language-based semiotics*. Motivated or natural signs are simply not amenable to semiotic study on Saussurean principles. As Metz says, images do not signify, they express. Saussure had excluded natural signs from his semiology; Metz is forced to do the same. Metz acknowledges that the image cannot be the sign of the cinema. Its expressive nature prohibits it from serving as a semiotic sign: *[i]mages are not the arbitrary, differentially determined, commutable units of a Saussurean langue.* The cinema lacks a langue. "Therefore," Metz states,

"the nerve-centre of the semiological process lies elsewhere."⁴⁷ Film semiotics, according to Metz, begins where ordinary linguistics ends. Linguistics has shown what the cinema is not; semiotics must now take on the positive task of determining what the cinema is.

Metz's treatment of the image put him into a *rather peculiar (and I believe untenable) position: that of attempting to develop a semiotics of a form of expression consisting primarily and essentially of phenomena not amenable to semiotic theory*. Metz is compelled to find the requisite semiotic features elsewhere than in the image in order to justify his project. He finds them in the notion of a *cinematographic language*.

Given the intention of "The Cinema: Language or Language System?" to evaluate the viability of the language metaphor, it is significant that Metz's discussion of how film constitutes a language is vague and abstruse. As I have pointed out, Metz considers the cinema a language sans langue. He also characterizes it as "une sorte de langage," a language of art, a poetics, a rhetorics, and a type of speech.⁴⁸ For Metz, these characterizations are justified because the cinema is meaningful discourse. It is not a

⁴⁷FL 75.

⁴⁸FL 65, 40, 58, 64, 90.

simple analog of reality: reality does not tell stories.⁴⁹

Thus Metz is led to the notion of narrativity, which becomes central to his semiotics. In his discussion of narrativity, Metz refers to the famous Kulechov experiments, whose results were used to 'scientifically' validate montage theory. The experiments consisted in juxtaposing unrelated images and observing their effect on the viewer. For example, images of Moscow's Red Square, the White House, two men ascending stairs, and two hands shaking, shown in sequence, suggested to the viewer that the men were in the same place at the same time. Another experiment linked a professional actor's neutral facial expression first with a shot of a bowl of soup, then with a shot of a coffin containing a woman's corpse, and finally with a shot of a girl playing. Audiences responded to the three sequences by observing in the actor's face expressions of hunger, grief, and paternal pride, respectively. For Kulechov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein, these Pavlovian-based experiments proved that cinematic meaning resided in the relationship between shots, not in the shot itself.

Metz argues that the "Kulechov effect" in no way authorizes the theory of montage-or-bust. Montage does not exhaust the possibilities of meaning in the cinema. "The

⁴⁹FL 105.

cinema is language, *above and beyond any particular effect of montage*,"⁵⁰ he says. For Metz, the experiments simply demonstrate that when two images are shown in succession the viewer will discover a connection. Metz characterizes this process as a "current of induction that refuses not to flow whenever two poles are brought sufficiently close together..." and a "'logic of implication,' thanks to which the image becomes language."⁵¹ "Going from one image to two images, is to go from image to language."⁵² For Metz, it is not because the cinema is language that it can tell stories; rather it has become language because it has told stories.

For Metz, cinematographic language involves the way in which images are ordered into meaningful (narrative) discourse. The nature of the image (its lack of paradigm, its similarity with the sentence rather than the word), forces semiotics to take the form of a "linguistics of speech". It must concern itself with units larger than those dealt with by structural linguistics, i.e., phonemes or morphemes, and seek instead the "large signifying units". These large signifying units are the various types of image sequences or syntagmatic structures used by film to advance

⁵⁰FL 47.

⁵¹FL 47.

⁵²FL 46.

the narrative. (An example of a large signifying unit is the alternating syntagm, in which shots are crosscut to suggest simultaneity of action. The technique is also called parallel montage, and was made famous by D.W. Griffith in the chase and rescue scenes of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).) Metz considers such a concern with units larger than those dealt with in structural linguistics, although a departure from the teachings of Saussure, to be convergent with a modern tendency⁵³ as exemplified by Levi-Strauss in myth, Roland Barthes in literature, Vladimir Propp in folktales, and Roman Jakobson in poetry.)

While the search for the "signifying unities of discourse"⁵⁴ may be a legitimate one, in Metz's project it is nevertheless propelled by a methodological inability to deal with the visual sign. The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, to recall Saussure, is the first principle of structural linguistics. Upon it rest the distinctions of langue/parole (code/message), synchronic/diachronic, and syntagmatic/paradigmatic. If the cinematic image is motivated (as Metz assumes it is), with a natural connection between signifier and signified, these distinctions would no

⁵³FL 84-90. Metz states: "A certain, too brutal, or too literally Saussurean, concept of the "language system/speech" dichotomy is becoming less and less tenable." 89 fn.

⁵⁴Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* 11.

longer apply, and a semiotics that depends on them is seriously jeopardized. Metz, however, having found the image to be natural and uncoded, and thus not a true (Saussurean) sign at all, simply abandons it as a theoretical entity in search for cinematic features that may "better convey the ideal semiological process." For Metz, the large signifying units become the true signs of film semiotics.

Metz recognizes the danger the nature of the cinematic image poses for a semiotics of the cinema. Towards the end of "The Cinema: Language or Language System?", after a detailed demonstration of how film differs from verbal language, and thus how the various distinctions upon which a Saussurean semiology relies do not apply, he says, "One can of course conclude that the cinema is not a language, or that it is so only in a sense that is altogether too figurative, and, consequently, it should not be dealt with through semiotics."⁵⁵ But, Metz continues, "this is a very negative point of view, particularly in the case of a social fact as important as the cinema." He concludes the essay:

These few pages were written in the belief that the time has come to start making certain conjunctions. An approach that would be derived as much from the writings of the great theoreticians of the cinema as from the studies of filmology and the methods of linguistics might, gradually--it

⁵⁵FL 89.

will take a long time--begin to accomplish, in the domain of the cinema, and especially on the level of the large signifying units, the great Saussurean dream of studying the mechanisms by which human significations are transmitted in human society.

De Saussure did not live long enough to remark on the importance the cinema has assumed in our world. No one disputes that importance. The time has come for a semiotics of the cinema.⁵⁶

The Theory of Analogy and the Grande Syntagmatique

It is important to note that, for Metz, the project of film semiotics rests on the possibility of a cinematographic language. Only insofar as film is in some sense a language could it possess the features that warrant and justify a Saussurean approach. As Metz says, "The very term "cinematographic language" already poses the whole problem of the semiotics of film."⁵⁷ In Ch. 5 of *Film Language*, "Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film," Metz states that film semiotics encounters its greatest obstacles where film differs from language. He isolates two points of maximal difference: *the motivation of signs and the lack of discrete units*.⁵⁸ Both points hinge on the expressive nature of the cinematic image, which he identifies,

⁵⁶FL 91.

⁵⁷FL 92.

⁵⁸FL 108.

following Barthes, as *analogical*.⁵⁹ Analogy is the perceptual similarity between the cinematic signifier and signified, which is provided by mechanical duplication.

According to Brian Henderson, a prominent film theoretician and critic of Metz, the theory of analogy founds Metz's theory of filmic discourse: "...the question of analogy is clearly bound up in Metz's work with the question of the possibility of a semiotic analysis of the cinema, and the question of how, where, and precisely on what is that analysis to operate."⁶⁰ Henderson argues that Metz's commitment to analogy prohibits the application of semiotic theory. He states his case strongly:

In section after section...Metz uses the concept of cinematic analogy to defeat in advance every stage of an *Elements* [Barthesian] analysis. Because of cinematic analogy, it is impossible to distinguish firmly between signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, paradigm and syntagm, and more generally, between signification and expression, and communication system and art.⁶¹

Because of the cinematic sign is analogic, it is impossible to break up the signifier without getting isomorphic segments of the signified. There is therefore no distinction

⁵⁹Barthes, "The Photographic Message" in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. S. Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 17.

⁶⁰Henderson, *A Critique of Film Theory* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1980) 166.

⁶¹Henderson 167.

between signifier and signified, no division of the syntagm to determine basic units, and no distribution of units along syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes: "Applied literally, across the boards, the doctrine of cinema as analogy precludes the possibility of a semiotics of the cinema."⁶²

Metz himself realizes the problem analogy poses for film semiotics. He says "for an actual semiotics of the cinema, analogy serves as a kind of stopping block: Wherever analogy takes over film signification...there is a lack of specifically cinematographic codification. That is why I believe filmic codes must be sought on other levels..."⁶³

Thus, for Metz, insofar as film is analogical (motivated, natural), it is not amenable to semiotics. But film, he says, is more than a simple analogue of reality: it is *narrative discourse*. In the search for "specifically cinematographic codification," Metz abandons the image as a potential site of semiotic analysis and embraces instead types of image sequences, artificial structures imposed on the analogic material of film in order to turn images into discourse, reality into art. For Metz, the codes specific to film are to be found in cinematographic language.

⁶²Henderson 166.

⁶³FL 110-11.

Metz's chief argument for cinematographic language involves his notion of narrativity. He argues that although there are many forms of cinema, the narrative film, the "feature-length film of novelistic fiction," deserves theoretical priority not only because it is what we normally think of as a film, but because "it was precisely to the extent that the cinema confronted the problems of narration that...it came to produce a body of specific signifying procedures."⁶⁴ In other words, the cinema was not always a language. Early cinema was simply a "means of mechanical recording, preserving, and reproducing moving visual spectacles." The pioneers of cinematographic language--Melies, Porter, Griffith--were "men of denotation rather than of connotation, they wanted above all to tell a story; they were not content unless they could subject the continuous, analogical material of photographic duplication to the *articulations*--however rudimentary--of a narrative discourse."⁶⁵

The concepts of denotation and connotation, alluded to above, deserve mention here, as they are central to Metz's thesis. They are used as presented by Barthes in his

⁶⁴FL 95.

⁶⁵FL 95.

Elements of Semiology.⁶⁶ Barthes follows Hjelmslev in defining language (or any system of signification) as comprising a *plane of expression* (signifier) and a *plane of content* (signified). *Denotation* refers to the relationship between the plane of expression and the plane of content when neither plane already constitutes a language. An example of denotation is ordinary language, where the word "pig" (signifier) denotes the concept pig (signified). *Connotation* refers to the relationship between the plane of expression and the plane of content when the plane of expression already constitutes a language. The use of the word "pig" to connote, say, slovenliness, has as the plane of expression both the signifier "pig" and the signified concept pig, that is, the meaning of the term pig as already constituted in the denotative language. In other words, the signifier of the connotation is made up of the sign (signifier *and* signified) of the denotation. The first level is the denotative system; the second level, which is more extensive and whose units may comprise several units of the denotative system, is the connotative system. Following Barthes, Metz argues that the denotation of the photographic image is secured through a photochemical process, one that

⁶⁶Barthes 89-94. Metz's semiotic principles as set out in *Film Language* are derived primarily from Barthes, this work in particular.

"fuses" the signifier with the signified: "denotation is visual transfer, which is not codified and has no inherent organization."⁶⁷

Of course the duplication is never perfect; between the object and its image there are many perceptual differences, which film psychologists have studied. But, from the point of view of semiotics, it is not necessary that the signifier and the significate be *identical*. Simple analogy provides sufficient motivation. For, even when it partially distorts its model, mechanical duplication does not analyze into specific units. There is no actual transformation of the object, but a simple partial *distortion*, which is purely perceptual.⁶⁸

Analogy is uncoded. Lacking commutable units, the photograph makes a semiotics of denotation difficult, if not impossible. As Barthes says: "...since the denotated message in the photograph is absolutely analogical, which is to say *continuous*, outside of any recourse to a code, there is no need to look for the signifying units of the first-order

⁶⁷FL 98.

⁶⁸FL 109. Metz is here also clearly indebted to Barthes. Barthes says:

From the object to the image there is of course a reduction--in proportion, perspective, colour--but at no time is this reduction a *transformation*...In order to move from the reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image. *Image, Music, Text* 17.

message..."⁶⁹ But, Metz hastens to add, the cinema is very different from still photography:

In the cinema, on the other hand, a whole semiotics of denotation is possible and necessary, for a film is composed of *many* photographs (the concept of montage, with its myriad consequences) - photographs that give us mostly only partial views of the diegetic referent... Thus a kind of filmic articulation appears, which has no equivalent in photography: It is the denotation itself that is being constructed, organized, and to a certain extent codified..."⁷⁰

Thus, Metz asserts, the cinema is a kind of language insofar as it is narrative. But it is narrative through its denotative aspect, the sequence of expressive images by which the story is unfolded, and upon which filmic connotation is grafted. Metz calls this former, represented aspect, the *diegesis*: the sum of the film's denotation.⁷¹ For Metz, the task of semiotics becomes the study of the film's diegesis: "How does the cinema indicate successivity, precession, temporal breaks, causality, adversative relationships, consequence, spatial proximity, or distance, etc? These are the central questions to the semiotics of the cinema."⁷²

⁶⁹Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* 20.

⁷⁰FL 98-9.

⁷¹FL 98.

⁷²FL 98.

Metz believes that although a semiotics of both denotation and connotation is possible, filmic denotation deserves theoretical priority. This is true for Metz on general principle: connotation (the level of 'art') always builds on denotation; i.e., the sign (signifier and signified) of denotation serve as signifier of the connotation.⁷³ Denotation is what is directly signified by the raw material of the film: "In the cinema, it is represented by the literal (that is, perceptual) meaning of the spectacle reproduced in the image, or the sounds duplicated by the sound track." Connotation is second order signification. Its signified "is the literary or cinematographic "style," "genre" (the epic, the western, etc), "symbol" (philosophical humanitarian, ideological, and so on), or "poetic atmosphere"--and its signifier is the whole denotated semiological material, whether signified or signifying."⁷⁴ Thus, while for Metz, art begins at connotation,⁷⁵ priority is given to denotation, which must precede the artistic enterprise.

"Cinematographic language" is first of all the literalness of a plot. Artistic effects, even when they are substantially inseparable from the semic

⁷³Metz is drawing explicitly from Barthes discussion of denotation and connotation in *Elements of Semiology*.

⁷⁴FL 96-7.

⁷⁵FL 79.

act by which the film tells us its story, nevertheless constitute another level of signification, which from the methodological point of view must come "later."⁷⁶

For Metz, the analogic nature of images cannot be the basis for a semiotics of the cinema. But this inability to deal with a fundamental aspect of cinematic meaning does not lead him to abandon or substantially revise his approach. On the contrary, encouraged by Barthes's emphasis on the larger units of discourse, Metz seeks the requisite features elsewhere: "The commutations and other manipulations by which the semiotics of the cinema proceeds therefore affect the large signifiatory units."⁷⁷ For Metz, the task of film semiotics becomes the study of "the ordering and functionings of the main signifying units used in the filmic message."⁷⁸

...the cinema is certainly not a language system (langue). It can, however, be considered as a *language*, to the extent that it orders signifying elements within ordered arrangements different from those of spoken idioms--and to the extent that these elements are not traced on the perceptual configurations of reality itself (which does not tell stories). Filmic manipulation transforms what might a mere visual transfer of reality into discourse. Derived from a kind of signification that is purely analogous and continuous--animated photography, cinematography--the cinema gradually shaped, in the course of its

⁷⁶FL 99.

⁷⁷FL 105.

⁷⁸FL 92.

diachronic maturation, some elements of a proper semiotics, which remain scattered and fragmentary within the open field of simple visual duplication.⁷⁹

In verbal language, the positing of a langue made the science of linguistics as an autonomous discipline possible. Given the methodological reliance of structural linguistics and therefore of semiology on langue, the discovery that the cinema did not have a langue could have meant that film in fact does not use signs and was therefore not amenable to a semiotic approach. Confronted by this difficulty, Metz did not abandon semiotics. [He did not challenge the arbitrary character of the semiotic sign as inherited from Saussure, nor did he reconsider the analogic nature of the cinematic image as inherited from Barthes and the realists. Rather, Metz abandoned what is perhaps the defining feature of the cinema--the moving image--to search for signlike, codified, signifying units elsewhere. He finds them in the *grande syntagmatique*, the large syntagmatic category of the image track.]

[The *grande syntagmatique* is the set of conventionalized, codified, and signifying orderings of various kinds that are used in film in order to advance the plot.⁸⁰] It is the chief result of Metz's analyses in *Film*

⁷⁹ FL 105.

⁸⁰ FL 119.

Language. To summarize the arguments by which he arrives at it: The cinema lacks the double articulation of verbal language. There is nothing corresponding to the purely distinctive units of verbal language, and there is nothing corresponding to the word. The minimal filmic unit, the image, therefore, corresponds not to a phoneme, morpheme, or word, but to an assertion, one or more sentences.⁸¹ The cinematic image is analogic and uncoded. (The cinema proceeds by "whole blocks of reality.") Codification is involved only at the level of the large signifying units, the syntagmatic orderings of images, which constitute a cinematographic language. "Although each image is a free creation, the arrangements of these images into an intelligible sequence--cutting and montage--brings us to the heart of the semiological dimension of film."⁸² The film sequence thus becomes the real, discrete unit of semiotic analysis; with Metz it becomes the true sign of film semiotics. Metz says that despite an unlimited number of potential images, the number of syntagmatic structures found in narrative films are relatively few. He isolates eight

⁸¹FL 100-1.

⁸²FL 101.

main types, which he organizes in a tabular form of binary oppositions.⁸³

The grande syntagmatique has some of the features of a langue. The set of syntagmatic orderings constitute a cinematographic code from which the filmmaker selects various ways of structuring the diegesis. It forms, at any given time, a synchronic state. It is relatively fixed, but it has a diachronic aspect. "Applying de Saussure's thought to the cinema, one could say that the large syntagmatic category of the narrative film *can change*, but that no single person can change it overnight."⁸⁴ The grande

⁸³The eight main types of syntagmatic structures are as follows: among autonomous segments, (1) autonomous shots versus syntagmas; among syntagmas, chronological and achronological syntagmas; among achronological syntagmas, (2) parallel and (3) bracket syntagmas; among chronological syntagmas, narrative and (4) descriptive syntagmas; among narrative syntagmas, (5) alternate narrative and linear narrative syntagmas; among linear narrative syntagmas, (6) scene and sequence; among sequences, (7) episodic and (8) ordinary sequences. *FL* 101,146.

An example of one of the oppositions may serve to clarify. Among narrative syntagmas (to be distinguished from descriptive syntagmas), Metz contrasts alternate syntagmas with linear syntagmas. The former intercuts several distinct temporal progressions (e.g., shot of the pursuers, followed by shot of the pursued, followed by shot of the pursuers); the latter consists of a single temporal succession encompassing all of the shots. Linear syntagmas can further be broken down into continuous sequences (e.g., a conversation scene, cutting back and forth between the speakers) or sequences in which the temporal order is linear but discontinuous (e.g., shots, often separated by dissolves or fades, showing the passage of the seasons).

⁸⁴*FL* 102.

syntagmatique also constitutes a paradigmatic category, since the film maker must choose from a limited number of signifying orderings. It is partially a grammar, in the sense that it governs the denotative structuring of a film and ensures intelligibility, but it is also a rhetoric because codification only affects the large units. It is also arbitrary to the extent that out of the large number of possible syntagmatic orderings, only a few become conventionalized.

Metz concludes:

The concept of linguistics can be applied to the semiotics of the cinema only with the greatest caution. On the other hand, the methods of linguistics--commutation, analytical breakdown, strict distinction between the significate and the signifier, between substance and form, between the relevant and the irrelevant, etc.--provide the semiotics of the cinema with a constant and precious aid in establishing units that, though they are still very approximate, are liable over time (and one hopes, through the work of many scholars) to become progressively refined.⁸⁵

Metz's conclusion that the cinema is a language without a language system follows from his commitment to specifically Saussurean dogma regarding the sign. Saussure's belief that the semiotic sign resembles the linguistic sign in its arbitrariness and linearity is reflected in Metz's entire project. His essay, "The Cinema: Language or Language

⁸⁵FL 107.

System?", is thus an attempt to show how film semiotics is possible despite the very different natures of cinematic and linguistic signs. For Metz, the shot or image is motivated and natural, unlike the linguistic sign, which is arbitrary and conventional. Saussure's exclusion of motivated and natural signs from semiology leads Metz into considerable theoretical confusion. While Metz appears to identify the image with cinematic sign, it has none of the features that warrant and justify a semiotic approach. Images are not the distinctive, commutable, differentially determined units of a langue or language system. Thus Metz persists in using Saussurean terminology to describe an object that is not amenable to a Saussurean analysis. Metz is compelled to abandon the image as the basis for film semiotics. He turns to the notion of a cinematographic language, which he believes the cinema exhibits despite the absence of a langue. Metz finds the requisite linguistic features to justify the project of film semiotics in the various narrative structures of a cinematographic language. These structures constitute a cinematographic code, the *grande syntagmatique*.

Metz's neglect of the image owes to his allegiance to Saussure's ideas regarding the sign and the language analogy underlying them. In the next chapter, I discuss Metz's semiotics and his idea of a cinematographic language in the

context of a critique by Peter Wollen. Wollen proposes that a semiotic theory that favours the linguistic sign is ill-equipped to deal with significant aspects of cinematic meaning. He introduces an alternative conceptual scheme derived from the ideas of Charles Sanders Peirce, the American pragmatist philosopher and theorist of signs.

The time has come for a semiotics of the cinema.

--Christian Metz, 1964

The time of the image has come.

--Peter Wollen, 1969

Chapter 2

PETER WOLLEN AND THE PEIRCEAN SIGN

Peter Wollen, British film theorist, teacher, and screen-writer, finds several problems with Christian Metz's film semiotics. His influential work, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*,¹ written in 1969, is a response to Metz's *Film Language*, in particular his essay "The Cinema: Language or Language systyem." Wollen, like Metz, is committed to semiotics as a general theory of signs, and to the specific development of a film semiotics. Unlike Metz, however, he attenuates his commitment to the linguistic analogy and the Saussurean tradition out of which it arose. Instead, Wollen adopts some of the semiotic concepts of Charles Sanders Peirce, the American pragmatist philosopher, with the intention of remedying Metz's approach.

¹Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969). Hereafter SM.

Wollen's book is divided into three chapters. The first, "Eisenstein's Aesthetics," reinvestigates Eisenstein in light of Metz's critique. This is important in his critique of Metz's realism. Chapter 2, "The Auteur Theory", attempts a synthesis of anthropological structuralism with the notion of film authorship. Chapter 3, "The Semiology of the Cinema," is of primary concern here. It sets forth Wollen's ideas on film semiotics and his critique of Metz, and introduces Peirce's sign trichotomy of icon, index, and symbol as a remedy to the problems he finds in Metz's approach. Wollen's introduction of Peirce's trichotomy to the semiotics of the cinema should not be seen as a wholesale critique of Metz's thesis. In the main, Wollen's theory belongs to the Saussurean structuralist tradition, and his work is an attempt to correct the problems he sees arising out of this tradition. Following Jakobson's claim that poetics belongs to linguistics, Wollen asserts that any definition of art must be made as part of a theory of semiotics. Wollen's stated intention in "The Semiology of the Cinema" is to show how the cinema can be considered a province of the general study of signs. His project echoes Metz's in "The Cinema: Language or Language System":

It has become increasingly clear that traditional theories of film language and film grammar, which grew up spontaneously over the years, need to be re-examined and related to the established discipline of linguistics. If the concept of

"language" is to be used it must be used scientifically and not simply as a loose, though suggestive metaphor.²

Wollen shares Metz's concern to evaluate systematically and scientifically the language metaphor and to assess to what extent film can be considered a language. Wollen, however, finds more problems with a language-based semiotics than does Metz, and believes problems arising out of Metz's work are due to his adherence to the methodology of structural linguistics.

The use of the language model in semiotics can be traced back to Saussure's claim that linguistics is at once a province of and a model for semiology. Wollen agrees with Barthes regarding the pervasiveness of verbal language. He argues that the history of art shows that it is "only in very rare cases that non-verbal systems can exist without auxiliary support from verbal code".³ However, he finds Barthes claim that semiology belongs to linguistics rather than the other way around a "desperate conclusion".⁴ Our experience of the cinema, he says, shows that "great complexity of meaning can be expressed through images...The implication of this is that it is not only systems

²SM 116.

³SM 118.

⁴SM 120.

exclusively 'grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign' which are expressive and meaningful. 'Natural signs' cannot be so readily dismissed as Saussure imagined."⁵ Thus Wollen contests Saussure's claim that semiology's main concern should be with systems based on the arbitrary sign. Wollen's conceives of the image, like Metz, as a natural sign, motivated by its object or referent. Like Metz also, he believes that although such signs pose challenges to the development of film semiotics, the cinema is nevertheless amenable to semiotic study. Unlike Metz, however, he does not believe a semiotics that emphasizes the arbitrary sign as conveying "better than others the ideal semiological process" is suitable for a medium consisting of non-arbitrary signs. Wollen believes that the work of Peirce on signs can provide a more precise understanding of what is meant by natural, motivated, and visual signs. A brief summary of the thought of Peirce on signs and semiotics is therefore useful here.

Peirce's Semiotics

Charles Sanders Peirce, the American pragmatic philosopher and logician, like Saussure, attempted to

⁵SM 120.

develop a general science of signs at the turn of the century. Peirce called his science semiotic, and his approach was very different from that of Saussure. According to Kindem, Peirce's contribution belongs to the tradition of Anglo-American empiricism descending from Locke.⁶ Whereas Saussure conceived of semiology as a scientific study of communication as a socio-cultural phenomenon, Peirce conceived of semiotic as a theory of logic: "Logic, in its general sense, is...only another name for *semiotic*, the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs."⁷ For Peirce, semiotics investigates the ways in which signs are used by a scientific intelligence to learn about reality.

In contrast to the Saussurean dyadic model of signifier-signified, Peirce believes semiosis is a triadic process involving sign, object, and interpretant. In Peirce's words,

A Sign, or Representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, or that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*.⁸

⁶Kindem 9.

⁷Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. J. Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955) 98.

⁸Peirce 99.

In Peirce's notion of semiosis, a sign (representamen), by virtue of its relation to an object, is able to stimulate an interpretant in the mind of an interpreter. The interpretant then stands in the same (or similar) relation to the object as does the sign that provoked the interpretant. The process is irreducibly triadic.⁹ The interpretant is then capable of acting as a further sign, stimulating new interpretants, which may stimulate others, and so on. Semiosis is the process by which a sign provokes an interpretant, which, acting as a sign, provokes another, ad infinitum.¹⁰ It refers both to communication and to thought-processes.

Kindem compares semiosis with Saussure's semiology:

Peirce's notion of unlimited semiosis is somewhat different from Saussure's conception of linear speech, for Peirce's semiosis corresponds to a scientific thought process, where signs stand for an object and stimulate interpretants and other signs in relation to that object, and not necessarily to sentences and grammar in the study of language. Peirce's goal is not to establish a science of linguistics but a general science of signs, which must be used in the pursuit of knowledge and truth.¹¹

According to Peirce, signs are divisible into three trichotomies. The second trichotomy, in which the sign is classified as an icon, index, or symbol according to the

⁹Peirce 100.

¹⁰Peirce 100.

¹¹Kindem 24.

nature of its relation with its object, is most important here. This is the scheme that Wollen applies to the cinematic sign, and that Eco later criticizes. According to Peirce, signs that share some character or have some similarity with their object are icons; signs which have some 'existential' relation or physical connection (e.g., cause-effect) with their object are indexes; and signs whose relation to their object is conventional or 'by law' are symbols.¹² (Peirce's 'symbolic' sign is the equivalent of Saussure's arbitrary sign, which has lead to considerable terminological confusion.) This classification of signs is especially significant in that it specifically addresses the object or referent of a sign, a concept that in the Saussurean tradition receives little attention.

Wollen considers Peirce's classificatory scheme fundamental for a semiotic theory of film.¹³ He says Peirce's triad of icon, index, and symbol is elegant and exhaustive. Because it concerns relations with the object, it is better equipped to deal with visual or natural signs. Wollen emphasizes that "Peirce did not consider these three types of signs mutually exclusive: on the contrary, all

¹²Peirce 101,102.

¹³SM 23.

three aspects frequently, or, he sometimes suggests, invariably, overlap and are copresent."¹⁴

Peirce's discussion of the portrait painting shows this to be the case:

We say that the portrait of a person we have not seen is not convincing. So far as, on the ground merely of what I see in it, I am led to for my idea of the person it represents, it is an Icon. But, in fact, it is not a pure Icon, because I am greatly influenced by knowing that it is an effect, through the artist, caused by the original's appearance, and is thus in a genuine obsistent relation to that original.¹⁵

That is, it is also an index. That Peirce recognized the copresence of sign aspects is also evident in his discussion of the photograph:

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection.¹⁶

For Peirce, therefore, the portrait is primarily iconic with indexical aspects, and the photograph is primarily indexical with iconic aspects. (Note, however, that Peirce does not appear to recognize symbolic dimensions in either. Greenlee,

¹⁴SM 123.

¹⁵John J. Fitzgerald, *Peirce's Theory of Signs as Foundation For Pragmatism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966) 53.

¹⁶Peirce 106.

for one, argues that Peirce was in error in this regard. He argues that the symbolic dimension in fact underlies both the indexical and icon signs.¹⁷⁾

Barthes's conception of the photographic image does not differ fundamentally from Peirce's notion of the indexical sign:

What is the content of the photographic message? What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality...Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect *analogon* and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photographic image: *it is a message without a code...*¹⁸

Barthes's 'paradox' of the photographic image, that it is a message without a code, clearly underlies Metz's thesis regarding the cinema, that it is *une langue sans langue*. Barthes compares the photograph to the drawing:

¹⁷In his discussion of the icon, for example, Greenlee says:

It is not enough to say that the icon is a sign which designates merely by virtue of a resemblance with its object; it must further be said that it signifies by virtue of a rule of interpretation to the effect that it designate through certain (and not all) respects of similarity to its object.

This recognition does not necessarily collapse the distinction between icon and symbol, however.

The icon can then be said to be symbolical, although not necessarily a 'symbol', if the concept of a symbol be reserved for a sign-object relation not depending on resemblance.

D. Greenlee, *Peirce's Concept of Sign* (The Hague: 1973) p.78.

¹⁸Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image, Music, Text* 17.

...of all the kinds of image only the photograph is able to transmit the (literal) information without forming it by means of discontinuous signs and rules of transformation. The photograph, message without a code, must thus be opposed to the drawing which, even when denoted, is a coded message.¹⁹

Thus whereas Peirce sees both the photograph and the portrait as being mixed indexical and iconic signs, Barthes opposes the photograph to the drawing on the basis of uncoded to coded, or indexical to symbolic. It is Wollen's argument that Metz's treatment of the cinema, following Barthes lead, reflects a *preoccupation with the indexical sign, which ultimately leads to a refusal to see semiotic features anywhere except in narrative technique.*²⁰ He argues that Metz sees the cinema as primarily consisting of natural signs with symbolic aspects (codification) existing chiefly on the level of narrativity, which serves as the potential site of semiotic analysis.

Wollen argues that Metz's preoccupation with the natural sign is related to his realism, which can be traced back to Bazin. In the first chapter of *What is Cinema?*, entitled "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin compares the photograph to an imprint, mould, death mask,

¹⁹Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text* 43.

²⁰Peter Wollen, "Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact," in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso Editions, 1982) 12.

Veronica, and relic. He describes the image as "a moulding, the taking of an impression, by the manipulation of light."²¹ As we saw in Ch.1, Metz's characterization does not fundamentally differ. He sees the image as analogical, which is the perceptual similarity between the cinematic signifier and signified, made possible by photomechanical duplication. Wollen argues that Metz's analogic sign is virtually identical to Peirce's indexical sign.

Wollen believes that Metz's conclusion that the cinema is a language without a langue is the result of his unsuccessful attempt to integrate the natural sign into a semiotics that is ill-equipped to deal with it, due to the centrality of the arbitrary, linguistic sign. According to Metz, the cinema is a language because it is narrative, it is meaningful discourse. Narrativity is made possible by the connection viewers make between successive images. Wollen criticises as imprecise and unsemiotical Metz's recourse to the notion of a "logic of implication", or "current of induction" by which the image becomes language.

Wollen argues that Metz's semiotics--its concentration on syntagmatic relations, denotation, and narrativity--fail to address significant aspects of cinematic meaning that are

²¹Bazin 12.

to be found in the *image*. This failure is the result of a bipolar conception of the sign:

In fact, obscured beneath his semiological analysis is a very definite and frequently overt aesthetic *parti pris*. For like Barthes and like Saussure, he perceives only two modes of sign existence: natural and cultural. Moreover he is inclined to see these as mutually exclusive, so that a language must be either natural or cultural, uncoded or coded. It cannot be both.²²

Wollen proposes that Peirce's triadic conception of index, icon, and symbol should replace the bipolar division of signs into natural and arbitrary. The cinematic image, in fact, exhibits all three dimensions of signs:

In fact, the aesthetic richness of the cinema springs from the fact that it comprises all three dimensions of the sign: indexical, iconic and symbolic. The great weakness of almost all those who have written about the cinema is that they have taken one of these dimensions, made it the ground of their aesthetics, the 'essential' dimension of the cinematic sign, and discarded the rest. This is to impoverish the cinema. Moreover, none of these dimensions can be discounted: they are copresent.²³

In Metz's case, his emphasis on the indexical aspects of the cinematic sign led him, encouraged by the linguistic analogy, to seek out symbolic features above the level of the image. The problem lies with Metz's reliance on Saussure, who "over-restricted the notion of signs by

²²SM 124.

²³SM 141.

limiting it to Peirce's 'symbolic.'²⁴ Wollen's application of Peirce's trichotomy allows him to view the image as containing all three aspects, and thus to recover the image as a potential site of semiotic analysis:

The great merit of Peirce's analysis of signs is that he did not see the different aspects as mutually exclusive. Unlike Saussure he did not show any particular prejudice in favour of one or the other. Indeed he wanted a logic and a rhetoric which would be based on all three aspects. It is only by considering the interaction of the three different dimensions of the cinema that we can understand its aesthetic effect.²⁵

Wollen proposes that cinematic realism is an overemphasis of the indexical aspect of the sign to the exclusion of the iconic and symbolic aspects. He argues that Bazin's conception of the image as an imprint or mould founds his realist aesthetic. Of the photograph Bazin states:

The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model.²⁶

For Bazin, fidelity to nature was the criterion of cinematic criticism. Formalism was the deforming intervention of human

²⁴SM 123.

²⁵SM 141.

²⁶Bazin 14.

agency. According to Wollen, Bazin's aesthetic "asserted the primacy of the object over the image, the primacy of the natural world over the world of signs." "Realism was the vocation of the cinema, not to signify but to reveal."²⁷

Wollen points out that Bazin's ontology of the image (as an imprint, or in Peirce's term, an index) and his disdain for formalist and expressionist film making are evident in Metz. Metz's concept of expression (as opposed to signification), as well as his critique of Eisenstein, would seem to validate Wollen's point. Metz's association of Eisenstein with erector sets, powdered milk and structural linguistics (the spirit of manipulation), leads Wollen to comment:

Thus Rossellini becomes a natural wholemeal director while Eisenstein is an ersatz, artificial, predigested. Behind these judgements stands the whole force of Romantic aesthetics: natural verses artificial, organic versus mechanical, inorganic versus fancy.²⁸

Wollen's critique of Metz's realism is consistent with that of other critics, such as Henderson, who charge that Metz's semiotics neither critiques nor supplants classical film theory, but rather "absorbs the core of film theory and presents it in a new guise".²⁹ In his discussion of Metz's critique of Eisenstein, Wollen also criticizes his use of

²⁷SM 126.

²⁸SM 135.

²⁹Henderson 112.

semiotic theory to "scientifically" invalidate formalist aesthetics.³⁰

In arguing that realism reflects an exclusive emphasis on the indexical sign, Wollen thereby extends Peirce's trichotomy from its application to the cinematic image to determine the predominant character of whole films and film movements. For Wollen, the realism/formalism dichotomy reflects the problematic bipolar division of signs into natural and arbitrary that is found in Saussure and Barthes. Thus Rossellini concentrated on the indexical quality of the sign and Eisenstein the symbolic. Wollen argues that a third category of film making exists, such as animated film, or the films of von Sternberg:

It was the iconic aspect of the sign which von Sternberg stressed, detached from the indexical in order to conjure up a world, comprehensible by virtue of resemblances to the natural world, yet other than it, a kind of dream world, a heterocosm.³¹

In effect, Wollen uses Peirce's iconic sign to attempt to collapse the realism/formalism dichotomy. Wollen goes on to argue that

Jakobson has pointed out that whereas Saussure held that 'sign's that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process', Peirce believed that in the

³⁰Wollen "Cinema and Semiology: Some Points of Contact" 10.

³¹SM 137.

most perfect of signs the iconic, the indexical and the symbolic would be amalgamated as nearly as possible in equal proportions.³²

He praises the films of Godard for realizing the full potential of the cinema:

In his hands, as in Peirce's perfect sign, the cinema has become an almost equal amalgam of the symbolic, the iconic and the indexical. His films have conceptual meaning, pictorial beauty and documentary truth.³³

Wollen's use of Peirce's alleged 'perfect sign' to validate the films of Godard appears inconsistent with his criticism of Metz's 'scientific' critique of Eisenstein. If Metz is guilty of using semiotics to critique formalist aesthetics, Wollen is certainly guilty of using semiotics to critique realism and to invalidate the ostensibly false dichotomy of realism and formalism.

Wollen's point is that Metz has not understood that signs and signification play a different role in film than they do in verbal language. Wollen invokes the work of Jakobson to corroborate his point. He cites Jakobson's demonstration that verbal language, being primarily symbolic, also consists of indexical and iconic signs as necessary elements of meaning. These *submerged* dimensions rise to assume greater importance in literature and poetry.

³²SM 142.

³³SM 154.

Wollen argues that the cinema also contains all three dimensions of the sign. Unlike language, however, the indexical and iconic are the dominant aspects, and the symbolic is limited and secondary. In the 'art' of the cinema, then, the submerged symbolic dimension will be most manifest.³⁴ This dimension, contrary to Metz's thesis, is to be found not exclusively in the narrative structures but also in the image itself. The failure to see this was, according to Wollen, the consequence "of a persistent, though understandable, tendency to exaggerate the importance of analogies with verbal language."³⁵ Metz's commitment to Saussurean principles and his theory of analogy, then, prevent his semiotics from properly dealing with the art of the cinema.

Metz has been roundly criticized for his concentration on filmic denotation. In "Semiotics and the Cinema: Metz and Wollen,"³⁶ Gilbert Harman says that Metz's preoccupation with filmic denotation follows from his commitment to a language-based semiotics:

How does language indicate one or another state of affairs or series of events? Linguistics seeks in the first instance to answer that question. Only after considerable progress has been made on that

³⁴SM 143.

³⁵SM 140.

³⁶Mast 204-21.

front in understanding linguistic denotation could linguistics hope to be able to investigate style, atmosphere, and other aspects of linguistic connotation. The same thing is true in the semiotics of the cinema, according to Metz.³⁷

Harman argues that Metz's definition of the denotation/connotation distinction cannot support his own conclusions, most particularly, the *grande syntagmatique*. For Metz, film semiotics must study the structure of filmic diegesis, i.e., the plot, the sum of the film's denotation. Harman's point is that many of the aspects Metz assigns to connotation need to be considered in order to identify the denotative structures of the diegesis. Thus Metz cannot

say simply that he wants, first, to restrict himself to examining the semiotic mechanisms by which the story of film is indicated. This is arbitrary unless there is a clear distinction between the ways in which plot is indicated and the ways in which other aspects of meaning are indicated. Metz's own limited investigations cast doubt on this, since, for example, one of his syntagmas, the bracket syntagma, is a series of shots showing things between which some relationship holds and not showing something that would normally be considered part of plot. The relation presented in this way cannot clearly be distinguished from the sorts of suggestions and human and philosophical messages that Metz counts as part of connotation.³⁸

Brian Henderson has also criticized Metz's assumption that denotation and connotation can be sharply distinguished and analyzed in separate stages. He argues that Metz's

³⁷Mast 206.

³⁸Mast 208-9.

theory of analogy prohibits such a distinction.³⁹ Metz himself argues that the nature of filmic denotation renders "connotation nothing other than a form of denotation."⁴⁰

The centrality of denotation in Metz's work can be found in Barthes, who, following Hjelmslev's definition, considered connotation a secondary meaning, constituted by a system of primary meaning, the denotation.⁴¹ Also according to Barthes, ideology is the signified of connotation.⁴² Several authors have pointed out that Metz's exclusion of connotation from his semiotics eliminates the study of ideology in the cinema.⁴³ Note that Barthes has recanted his position regarding the denotation-connotation question, claiming that the primacy of denotation is itself an ideological illusion:

Structurally, the existence of two supposedly different systems--denotation and connotation--enables the text to operate like a game, each system referring to the other according to the requirements of a certain *illusion*. Ideologically, finally, this game has the advantage of affording the classic text a certain innocence: of the two systems, denotative and connotative, one turns back on itself and indicates its own existence: the system of denotation; denotation is not the

³⁹Henderson 167.

⁴⁰*FL* 118.

⁴¹Barthes 91.

⁴²Barthes 92.

⁴³Henderson 131.

first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations.⁴⁴

Barthes states that if denotation is considered the privileged system, it is only "because we are still in awe of the prestige of linguistics."⁴⁵

Wollen, for his part, believes Metz's use of the denotation-connotation distinction, i.e., of what Peirce called "J.S. Mill's objectionable terminology," makes his semiotics incapable of dealing with the 'art' of the cinema. Metz's conception of the image as uncoded denotation prohibits the evaluation of sign relations that exist on the level of the image, thereby effectively eliminating the study of iconography and symbolism. For example, Wollen conceives of the symbol (as in the non-technical sense of the Christian cross or scales of justice), as a mixed sign, consisting of iconic and symbolic dimensions. Metz's refusal to see symbolic dimensions on the level of the image cripples his ability to discuss these important aspects of cinematic meaning.

Wollen's critique of Metz and his introduction of Peirce's trichotomy of icon, index, and symbol is an attempt to remedy several of the problems he finds in Metz's

⁴⁴Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 9.

⁴⁵Barthes 7.

semiotics, in particular the neglect of the image. He is successful insofar as he identifies many of the areas of difficulty that arise in the application of a Saussurean semiology to the cinema. He is less successful, I believe, in applying Peirce's ideas. Wollen does not specifically examine the ways in which the signs of Peirce's trichotomy relate in particular images, nor does he outline a methodology for doing so. He uses the notions of index, icon, and symbol to characterize whole films and film movements in terms of documentary truth, pictorial beauty, and conceptual meaning. Cinematic realism thus becomes an undue emphasis on the indexical aspects of the cinema. The cinema should strive for an equal balance of all three signs. Such an extrapolation of Peirce's trichotomy is unjustified, and the resulting notions are vague and imprecise.

Moreover, Wollen does not address the important theoretical and philosophical problems arising out of a synthesis of Peirce's and Saussure's ideas. Peirce's inclusion of the object in the sign relation is strictly incompatible with the basic tenets of Saussure's semiology. Wollen's application of Peirce's trichotomy fails to integrate natural and motivated signs into a film semiotics. By viewing the image as the copresence of sign aspects, Wollen is able, unlike Metz, to talk about codification on

the level of the image. But those aspects that are considered 'natural' remain semiologically off-limits (and Wollen sees the cinema as consisting primarily of natural signs), since they are motivated and uncoded. Therefore, Wollen, like Metz, is unable to consider within a unified semiotic theory significant aspects of cinematic meaning. He does not achieve his goal of integrating the image into film semiotics: he integrates only the symbolic aspects of the image. So Wollen's semiotics, like Metz's, is forced to abandon the natural sign and seek out those features that best convey "the ideal semiological process": the arbitrary sign. The following chapter considers the contribution of Umberto Eco, whose work on signs can successfully integrate the image into a semiotics of the cinema.

There can be no message without a code.

--Umberto Eco, 1967

There is no cinematic sign.

--Christian Metz, 1971

Chapter 3

ECO AND THE VISUAL SIGN

Umberto Eco's contribution to film semiotics must be extricated from his more general writings on semiotic theory. Like Metz and Wollen, he firmly believes the cinema can and should be studied semiotically. His chief concern, however, is for the development of a general theory of signs, and most of his work concerns the broader theoretical issues of this more general project. Eco presented his theory of signs in 1979 in *A Theory of Semiotics*.¹

Eco's few writings on the cinema serve primarily to illustrate and test his broader theoretical principles, in particular those regarding the visual sign. The received conception of the visual sign led Metz to speak of the cinema as a language without a langue, and encouraged Wollen to adopt Peirce's classification of icon, index, and symbol.

¹Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

Eco believes neither the Saussurean nor Peircean tradition adequately accounts for the visual sign. He criticizes Saussure's exclusion of visual and motivated signs from semiology and rejects Peirce's idea that the object participates in the sign relation. Eco's critique of iconicity and his positing of multiple articulations in the cinema specifically address some of the problems encountered by Metz and others in the attempt to develop a semiotics of the cinema. Eco's work on signs poses a third alternative to the traditions of Saussure and Peirce, and points a possible way out of some of the problems of the "first semiotics."

Eco's 1967 essay, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code"² was written in response to Metz's film semiotics, in particular his essay "The Cinema: Language or Language System?" Eco writes:

...Metz, in contemplating a semiological investigation of film, recognizes a primal entity not otherwise analysable, not reducible to discrete units which could compound it by articulation, and this *primum* is the *image*. What is meant here is the notion of the image as something non-arbitrary, and deeply motivated--a sort of *analogue* of reality, which can't be bounded by the conventions of a 'langue'. Thus the semiology of cinema would be the semiology of a 'speech' without a language behind it, and the semiology of certain 'types of speech,' that is of

²Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code" (orig. 1967) in B. Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 590-606.

the great syntagmatic unities whose combination makes filmic discourse a reality. Anyway our problem today is whether it is possible to find convention, code, articulation *beyond* the image...³

Eco's response to Metz is to criticize the notion of the image common to Saussure, Barthes, Bazin, Metz, and even Peirce. Eco also criticizes what he has referred to as the 'dogma of the double articulation,'⁴ and he posits a triple articulation of the cinematic code. In this chapter I discuss these propositions and how they contribute to the development of film semiotics.

Critique of the Image

Metz's idea that the image lacked the double articulation of verbal language led him to speak of the 'quasi-fusion' of the signifier and the signified, where the signifier was the photographic image and the signified was the object represented (despite a violation of strict Saussurean logic). Metz used the term "iconic analogy" or simply "analogy" to refer to the perceptual similarity of signifier and signified that was provided by photomechanical duplication. For Metz, the photographic signifier is

³Eco, in Nichols 591.

⁴Eco, *La Struttura Assente* (Milan, 1968) 201.

motivated by the signified. Signification in the image or visual sign is thus natural and uncoded, whereas in the linguistic sign it is conventional and codified. Metz thus arrives at Barthes's conclusion that the photographic image is "a message without a code". [Lacking codification, there can be no commutation of the image and thus no paradigmatic category.] Thus Metz's semiotics of the cinema takes the form of a semiotics of the syntagm. He ultimately arrives at the *grande syntagmatique*, a cinematographic code governing the structures by which syntagms are sequenced to form narrative discourse. Had Metz recognized the possibility of codification existing below the level of the image, his conclusions at this point may have been very different.

Eco's thesis, stated simply, is that there can be no message without a code. All meaning is coded:

The semiological investigation starts from the principle that if there is to be communication, it must be established and governed by the way the emitter organizes a message. He does this according to a system of rules socially conventionalized...which make up the code...if the addressees understand, it means that below their understanding exists a code. If we can't manage to get ahold of it, that doesn't mean that there's no code at all, but rather that it still has to be found.⁵

In some respects, this is a return to the thought of Saussure, for whom semiology must study the *langue* of

⁵Eco in Nichols 592.

systems based on the arbitrary, conventional sign. Saussure excluded visual signs, which he considered natural and uncodified, for this very reason. But for Eco, whose concern is to discover general laws applicable to all semiotic phenomena, the exclusion of natural and visual signs is unduly restrictive. He moves in the direction of Peirce, who attempted to accommodate such signs in his semiotic theory. But Eco finds untenable Peirce's assumption that iconic and indexical signs signify by virtue of a natural relationship with their object or referent. Peirce, like Metz, believes such signs are naturally motivated. Eco, like Saussure, rejects the idea that signs mean what they mean because of their relationship with something that is not a sign. For Eco, even the so-called natural sign, insofar as it is a message, signifies by virtue of conventional codification.

Eco criticizes the very idea of the sign as classical semiology has presented it. The classical notion of sign is naive and misleading, he says, because it suggests a distinct, fixed entity, which is organized by a static code. He prefers the term *sign-function*, following Hjelmslev, which emphasizes the relational and processual aspect of signification. Eco says that it is wrong to think of signs as static entities or 'things'. They are rather a posited entity, the meeting ground of a complex network of changing relationships. (Eco nevertheless continues to use the term

"sign", as it would be 'uselessly over-sophisticated' to abandon it.)

Eco defines the sign as "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*."⁶ He adopts a dyadic conception of the sign-function à la Saussure, as opposed to Peirce's triadic conception of sign, object, interpretant, but he replaces Saussure's *signifier* and *signified* with the terms *expression* and *content* to convey their greater generality.

A sign-function "is the correlation, posited by a rule of equivalence, between an expression (that is a material occurrence) and its content."⁷ A code is a repertoire or system of correlational rules. A sign-function is realized when two *functives* (expression and content) are correlated by a rule. The functive of one correlation may enter into another correlation, thus becoming a different functive and giving rise to a new sign-function:

Thus signs are the provisional result of coding rules which establish *transitory* correlations of elements, each of these elements being entitled to enter--under given coded circumstances--into another correlation and thus form a new sign....One can then maintain that it is not true that a code organizes signs; it is more correct to

⁶Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 16.

⁷Eco, "On the Contribution of Film to Semiotics," in Mast 219.

say that codes provide the rules which generate signs as concrete occurrences in communicative intercourse. Therefore the classical notion of 'sign' dissolves itself into a highly complex network of changing relationships.⁸

For similar reasons, Eco is also critical of sign typologies, like Peirce's trichotomy of icon, index, and symbol. For Eco, Peirce's trichotomy does make clear that there are differences between types of sign-production, but it fails to unify these differences within a common theoretical framework. Peirce demonstrates that in any sign all three sign aspects may be copresent and that there is never a pure iconic or a pure indexical sign. But Eco argues that these three modes are semiotically incompatible. For Eco, whose theory is based on the idea that all meaning is cultural, Peirce is unable to reconcile signs that abide by natural laws and signs that abide by cultural laws. Eco believes that Peirce is unable to provide a unified theory of sign-functioning.

Eco agrees with Peirce that there are different modes of sign production, so that for instance the manner in which an image "stands for" something is different from the way a word does. Critics of semiotics have objected to the use of the term sign to cover such disparate phenomena. "The theory of signs," Gilbert Harman has charged, "contains no laws or

⁸Eco in Mast 49.

general principles. Semiotics is really a collection of three or four disparate subjects."⁹ Eco, however, believes that the different modes of "standing for" can be explained through a unified theoretical framework. Eco argues that the apparent incompatibility of the arbitrary linguistic sign, which is governed by the laws of convention, and the motivated, natural sign, held to be governed by the laws of nature, led to the Barthesian thesis that the latter be subordinated to the former and that linguistics should serve as the model for semiotics. It is not difficult to identify Metz in Eco's characterization of such a scheme in which,

semiotics would be obliged to distinguish between signs which are signs (because their parameters correspond to those of verbal signs, or can be metaphorically viewed as analogous to them) and signs which are not signs at all. Which may sound paradoxical, even though it is upon such a paradox that many distinguished semiotic theories have been established.¹⁰

Eco argues that nonlinguistic signs can and must be studied by semiotics. His theory departs from the strict linguistic lines of Saussure, Barthes and Metz. This is reflected in his use of the term code rather than langue "because it invites no end of ambiguity to try to describe the various communicative codes on the model of that special

⁹Gilbert Harman, "Semiotics and the Cinema: Metz and Wollen," in Mast 216.

¹⁰Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 177.

code, particularly sytematized and doubly articulated--the verbal language."¹¹ For Eco, a code is a system of variously articulated correlative rules; the langue is simply one specific type of code, that belonging to verbal language. As Eco says, the rules of semiotics are not necessarily the rules of linguistics: "A semiotics of film is possible if one accepts that semiotics is neither a province nor a byproduct of linguistics."¹²

But Eco also departs from Peirce, and therefore from Wollen's attempt to apply Peirce's ideas to film semiotics. At the heart of Eco's critique of Peirce's trichotomy is his *rejection of the idea that a sign denotes, refers to, or stands for an object or a thing*. As I explained, Eco defines the sign-function as a posited correlation between an expression and a content. The content of a sign is not an object or a thing but is rather a *cultural unit*. For Eco, a sign is not a sign of a thing; a sign is a sign of a *conventional content*. For example, the term 'dog' does not denote an actual, sensible dog, but rather a "set, a class, a logical entity." That is, it denotes a culturally constituted and socially shared notion of "dog". "Every attempt to establish what the referent of a sign is forces

¹¹Eco in Nichols 592.

¹²Eco in Mast 231.

us to define the referent in terms of an abstract entity which is moreover only a cultural convention."¹³

Eco argues that adherents to a reference theory of meaning would have to exclude from a discussion of meaning those signs that do not correspond to real objects, such as those denoting imaginary objects ("unicorn", for example) or syncategorematic terms ("with", "of", "but", "nevertheless", etc). Thus, for Eco, the meaning of a sign is not constituted by its relationship to its object. A sign does not stand for something that is a non-sign, as Peirce would have us believe. Eco, in effect, excises the object from Peirce's triadic relation, while maintaining the "stand-for" relation between an expression and a cultural content.

The confusion of the sign's content or signified with its referent leads to what Eco calls "the referential fallacy". Peirce's trichotomy commits this fallacy insofar as it postulates the referent as a defining criterion of classification. Eco's exclusion of reference from semiotics destroys the ground of Peirce's trichotomy, rendering it incapable of even classifying sign phenomena. Any classification of signs based on their relationship to their objects cannot be accommodated by Eco's conceptual framework.

¹³Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 66.

Eco thus sets up a methodological boundary between conditions of signification and conditions of truth, or between intensional or extensional semantics. How the world may be related to the content of signs is an 'extrasemiotic' concern:

Within the framework of a theory of codes it is unnecessary to resort to the notion of extension, nor to that of possible worlds; the codes, insofar as they are accepted by a society, set up a 'cultural' world which is neither actual nor possible in the ontological sense; its existence is linked to a cultural order, which is the way in which a society thinks, speaks and, while speaking, explains the 'purport' of its thought through other thoughts.¹⁴

Eco characterizes his semiotic theory as a "theory of the lie", defining a sign as anything that can be used to lie. Since signs may stand for non-existent entities, such a formulation serves to emphasize Eco's exclusion of reference from semiotics. In the context of film semiotics, the theory of the lie has considerable rhetorical force. From the time of its invention, the photographic image was extolled for its veracity: "The photograph does not lie!" This slogan is not inconsistent with the thoughts of Bazin, Barthes, Wollen and Metz. It embodies those supposed features of the image that pose the greatest challenges to the application of semiotic theory to non-verbal phenomena, those features that led Metz to declare the photographic image to be not a true

¹⁴Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 61.

sign at all. Eco, in sharp contrast, holds that the photograph is indeed a sign, and it is so because it can be used to lie.

Peirce recognized a symbolic dimension in some iconic signs, but failed to see the role of convention in the photograph. There is much evidence to support the idea that convention has a part to play in photographic signification. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the meaning of a photograph varies cross-culturally. Allan Sekula writes:

Consider for the moment the establishment of a rudimentary discourse situation involving photographs. The anthropologist Melville Herskovits shows a Bush woman a snapshot of her son. She is unable to recognize any image until the details of the photograph are pointed out. Such an inability would seem to be the logical outcome of living in a culture that is unconcerned with the two-dimensional, analogue mapping of three-dimensional 'real' space, a culture without a realist compulsion...The Bush woman 'learns to read' after learning first that a 'reading' is an appropriate outcome of contemplating a piece of glossy paper. Photographic 'literacy' must be learned.¹⁵

Eco attacks the realist notion of the image, this "particularly obstinate bit of bourgeois folklore" as Sekula puts it, as illusory. The photograph is not an objective representation of reality, nor a piece of nature itself; it is not a 'pure denotation', nor a message without a code.

¹⁵Allen Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Thinking Photography*, Victor Burgin, ed. (London: McMillan, 1982) 85-6.

The photograph, insofar as it is a message at all, is a product of a cultural complex of transitory, coded relationships, apart from which it can have no significance. It is therefore amenable to semiotic study. Eco sees his approach as demystifying. In discovering codes where none were thought to be, semiotics is a tool for the demystification of the illusion of reality:

It is very dangerous to refuse to recognize semiotic laws acting in cinematographic and filmic phenomena. In this way films are believed to be the spontaneous reproduction of reality, they are polluted by a sort of referential and indexical fallacy and it becomes impossible to detect the plots of culture under the supposed spontaneity of nature. Without a semiotic awareness films are viewed as magic spells. One believes that things make films. The semiotic approach is not only a criticism of the illusions of reality, it is also a continuous criticism of the ideological shaping of the reality on the part of the processes of semiosis.¹⁶

In the context of film semiotics, Eco's project can be seen as the attempt to consider natural and visual signs as 'true' signs, embodying features in common with linguistic signs that make them amenable to a unified approach. He, like Wollen, believes the cinematic image must be treated semiotically, not subordinated, as it is with Metz, to the narrative sequence. But unlike Wollen's appeal to Peirce, Eco's critique of reference places him closer to the thought of Saussure. Saussure, we recall, considered neither the

¹⁶Eco in Mast 233.

signifier nor signified as physical phenomena. The signifier of a sign is not a sound but an acoustic *image*, a sensation, a psychological not a physical entity, and the signified of a sign is a concept, not an object.¹⁷ That Saussure considered natural signs to be motivated by their objects was sufficient for him to exclude them from semiological study. By characterizing the signified of a sign as a cultural content, Eco similarly makes the distinction between reference and signification, between the physical and the social fact. But by also characterizing visual and so-called natural signs in this way, Eco makes possible their integration into a semiotic theory.

An obvious objection to Eco's position is that visual signs *do* exhibit some sort of natural relationship with their referent. If it can be shown that signs are to some degree motivated by, similar or analogous or naturally linked to their objects, then Eco's theory would be untenable. In his famous critique of iconicity, Eco examines Peirce's notion of similarity or resemblance in an attempt to show that it too is a matter of cultural learning and conventional codification.

Eco begins with the idea of a sign "sharing properties"

¹⁷Saussure 66.

of the object, the definition of iconicity given by Morris, a follower of Peirce. Eco says that a simple phenomenal inspection of an iconic sign and its referent shows this not to be the case. He uses the example of an illustration for a beer advertisement to show that the experience of an actual glass of beer and a poster of a glass of beer stimulate different perceptual codes, which must be correlated on the basis of a rule:

Thus when looking at the actual glass of beer I perceive on a given surface the presence of a uniform layer of transparent material which, when struck by light, gives off silver reflections, thereby producing the *perceptum* which I call "icy film on the glass"; on the other hand in the drawing I perceive on a given paper surface a film of non-transparent material composed of two or more different shades of colour that, by their mutual contrast, create the impression of incident luminosity. What kind of structural relationship remains unchanged between film and light, on the one hand, and two colours on the other? And does the result of the two procedures produce the 'same' perceptual effect? Is it not better to assume that, on the basis of *previous learning*, I view as one and the same perceptual result what are in fact two different perceptual results?¹⁸

Kindem argues that Eco's critique of Peirce is based on a misreading. Taking Morris's definition of shared properties, he says, Eco emphasizes the material differences between sign and referent in order to prove the existence of a cultural correlation:

¹⁸Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 193.

Eco reduces the "perceptual similarity" of two separate glasses of beer to an enumeration of the different physical properties of a two-dimensional advertisement and an actual glass of beer. Concentrating upon material differences, Eco argues that previous cultural learning provides a conventional link between the two glasses of beer. One could also argue that it is the perceptual similarities in the spatial relations of the two glasses of beer rather than the material differences of the poster and the glass that are of primary importance in visual signification.¹⁹

Kindem argues that a cultural link is entirely consistent with Peirce's theory, even if Peirce minimized the role of the symbolic. But Kindem fails to grasp that Eco's refutation of iconic similarity on the basis of material differences between sign and referent is not an attempt to substitute a cultural for a natural connection, but is rather related to his larger project to reject any connection between sign and referent, at least any connection that semiotics would have to recognize in order to understand sign-functioning. The cultural connection Eco speaks of is between an expression and a cultural content, not between a sign and a referent. Eco's critique of iconicity is integral to his project of methodologically excluding reference from semiotics. Eco may be guilty of a lack of clarity, but not of a misinterpretation of Peirce.

Kindem's argument regarding Eco's concentration on shared material properties is more to the point, however.

¹⁹Kindem 38.

Eco perhaps spends undue attention to Morris's definition of iconicity (the sign's sharing or possessing the properties of its object).²⁰ Morris's definition differs from that of Peirce, who spoke of similarity or resemblance, and it is more easily attacked. In his earlier writings, Eco's critique of iconicity appears to rely on his refutation of Morris's conception. But in *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco acknowledges that to say a sign is *similar* to its object is not to say that it possess some of its properties. He examines Peirce's 'more subtle' definition with the same intention to show that similarity is also a matter of convention.

In what sense can an image be said to be similar to its object? (Eco considers the notions of similarity and analogy to be essentially synonymous.) Having repudiated a notion of similarity based on shared properties, Eco argues that similarity can be best understood as geometric similitude, defined as the property shared by two figures that have equal angles and proportionate sides. He thus addresses the spatial basis of similarity that Kindem had suggested in the passage above. But Eco points out that such similitude can only be arrived at on the basis of rules and conventions that recognize as pertinent some factors (for example,

²⁰Charles Morris, *Signs, Language and Behavior* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1946).

proportion) and disregards others as irrelevant (for example, size and texture). Similitude is *produced* and must be *learned*.

But what of the supposed indexical nature of the image? Even if similarity is culturally coded, is there not a sense in which the photograph refers to, is motivated by, actual physical objects? Is photography not a photomechanical process whereby light is reflected from an object and recorded on a light-sensitive emulsion? Eco agrees that photography is indeed such a process, and the image can even said to be in some sense caused by the object. Thus Eco does not deny aspects of 'motivation' in this sense; they are simply irrelevant to semiotics: "The elements of motivation exist, but they can only work when they have become conventionally accepted and coded."²¹ The same argument used against iconicity applies in the case of the index. An index is the functive of a sign-function where the correlation has been posited on the basis of convention. Indexes must be interpreted according to learned conceptual schemes. A hunter learns to recognize the imprint of a particular animal on the basis of coded rules of similitude. Understanding images must be learned.

²¹Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 199.

To say that so-called iconic and indexical signs are conventionally coded is not, for Eco, to say that they are arbitrarily coded. Eco criticizes the strict opposition of arbitrary/motivated and its supposed equivalence to the conventional/natural opposition. Eco traces this opposition and equivalence back as far as Plato (in the *Cratylus*, Plato opposed *Nomos* to *Physis*); it is fundamental to Saussure's semiology and manifest in Metz's work on the cinema. Eco agrees with Wollen that signs cannot simply be divided into two mutually exclusive categories with the arbitrary and conventional in one and the motivated and natural in the other. Eco speaks of grades or *degrees* of arbitrariness or motivation (and therefore degrees of iconicity), which makes a classification of sign types on the basis of these strict oppositions untenable:

So-called iconism in fact covers many semiotic procedures, many ways of producing signals ordered to a sign-function, and...even though there is something different between the word /dog/ and the image of a dog, this difference is not the trivial one between iconic and arbitrary (or "symbolic") signs. It is rather a matter of a complex and continuously gradated array of producing signs...²²

Eco's belief that the arbitrary and the conventional are not coextensive is a fundamental departure from Saussure and Metz. It means that, for Eco, a sign may be conventional

²²Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 190.

and yet not arbitrary: A sign can be motivated by something and nevertheless be conventionally correlated with it. Thus Eco avoids the assumption that visual signs, in order to be signs at all, would have to be a kind of linguistic sign with a double articulation. Eco avoids the paradox of a sign being at once motivated and conventional by rejecting the identification of the motivated with the natural. From the perspective of his semiotics, a sign is not motivated by a natural relationship with its referent, but rather the expression of a sign-function may be motivated by the *form* of its content. An illustration of a glass of beer is a coded expression that is motivated by a coded cultural content of a glass of beer. The imprint of a cat's paw, insofar as it functions as a sign, is not motivated by the form of a specific cat, but by the form of the conventional notion of "cat". Thus Eco argues that something may be similar to, or motivated by, something else and still be conventionally correlated to it, and further, that similarity and motivation do not concern the relationship between an image and its object but between an expression and a *previously conventionalized content*.

Eco's critique of the image breaks down the realist conception of the image by demonstrating the possibility of conventional codification at or below the level of the image. By showing that motivation and similarity in visual signs are in fact conventional, he restores the possibility of treating these signs in a semiotic manner. But what are the codes of the visual sign? How do they differ from the code of language, that is, the langue? In what sense are images both motivated and coded?

In his discussion of the photograph, Eco argues that in signs of such high iconicity, motivation may have less to do with explicit cultural rules than with the basic mechanisms of perception. For Eco, perception itself is coded. Similarity or motivation in these signs describes the relationship between two perceptual situations. As Eco says, images "reproduce some of the conditions of perception, correlated with normal perceptive codes. In other words we perceive the image as a message referred to a given code, but this is the normal perceptive code which presides over our every act of cognition."²³ But he hastens to add that only some of the conditions of perception are reproduced, which therefore calls into play conventional rules of selection:

²³Eco in Nichols 594.

There's a principle of economy both in the recollection of perceived things and in the recognition of familiar objects, and it's based on what I call 'codes of recognition.' These codes list certain features of the object as the most meaningful for purposes of recollection or future communication: for example, I recognize a zebra from a distance without noting the exact shape of the head or the relation between legs and body. It is enough that I recognize two pertinent characteristics--four-leggedness and stripes. These same codes of recognition preside over the selection of the conditions of perception which we decide to transcribe into an iconic sign.²⁴

Iconic signs depend for recognizability upon the selection of pertinent features of the *recognition code*, which are transcribed on the basis of graphic conventions into their expressions. The conventions that posit a correlation between pertinent features and the graphic devices that make up the expression constitute an *iconic code*. Another type of code²⁵ involved in iconic codes are *codes of transmission*, which "construct the determining conditions" for the perception of images. Examples of such codes are the dots of a half-tone image, or the lines that comprise the television image, which, despite their obvious conventionality, result in signs that are highly iconic.

²⁴Eco in Nichols 594.

²⁵Eco in fact postulates ten codes possibly operating in the meaning of iconic signs. They are perceptive codes, codes of recognition, codes of transmission, tonal codes, iconic codes, iconographic codes, codes of taste and sensibility, rhetorical codes, stylistic codes, and codes of the unconscious. Eco in Nichols 596-98.

Transmission codes are no less operative in the photograph, whose expression, though in some sense caused by its content, is selectively (conventionally) controlled.

Eco is cautious when discussing the possible articulations of icons. He postulates three possible levels at work in iconic signs:²⁶ *figures (figurae)*, *recognition semes*, and *supersigns*. *Figurae* (after Hjelmslev) are the elements of perception that combine to form recognizable features. They are the "conditions of perception (e.g., subject-background relationship, light contrasts, geometrical values) transcribed into graphic signs according to the rules of the code."²⁷ They correspond to the phonemes of verbal language insofar as they are not in themselves meaningful until combined into signs: they are

²⁶Many commentators have erroneously concluded that figures, recognition semes, and supersigns constitute the triple articulation of the cinematic code. This is a misinterpretation, partly encouraged by Eco himself. In his 1967 article, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," Eco characterized these divisions as articulations (he originally named them figures, signs, and semes). However, in the same article, Eco states explicitly that these three levels work according to a double articulation between semes (which may be analyzed into recognizable units) and *figurae*. At any rate, supersigns may be provisionally analyzed into recognition semes, but this cannot be a true articulation, since the smaller units represent portions of the content of the larger units. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco also speaks of a possible double articulation of the image, however difficult to discern. In both places, he states that the triple articulation is unique to the cinema.

²⁷Eco in Nichols 596.

expression elements that have no equivalent on the content plane. Recognition semes are the pertinent features that comprise the larger sign. They are the smallest recognizable units, for example, a nose, eye, ear, or the stripes of a zebra. Supersigns are the iconic signs or images proper, composed of recognition semes. Their expression is not related to a content unit but to an entire proposition.

Eco's conception of the image differs fundamentally from that of Metz, who founds his film semiotics on the premise that the image lacks articulation. Eco, like Metz, believes the image must be viewed as a *text*, since it is not the verbal equivalent of a word but of a phrase or a whole story: "The image of a horse does not mean 'horse' but as a minimum 'a white horse stands here in profile.'" ²⁸ Eco grants that the image is unlike the word in a way that makes it difficult to identify the codes at work. Unlike words, images communicate on the basis of weak codes, "which are barely defined and continuously changing, and in which the free variants prevail over the pertinent features." ²⁹ In the English language, the expression 'horse' is strongly coded: there are strict phonetic limits outside of which an utterance would not be recognized as an utterance of the

²⁸Eco in Nichols 596.

²⁹Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 214.

word 'horse', and could therefore no longer denote the content horse. But in the case of the image, there are an infinite number of ways to denote a horse. A horse may be signified by a simple stroke of a line, or by a meticulously detailed sketch. It may be photographed in any number of manners, using any number of techniques. It may be shown grazing, galloping, or mating. In each case, the expression still means 'horse', even if it means more than that.

"Therefore," Eco says, "we find ourselves faced with the fact that there exist large-scale blocks (texts) whose articulatory elements are hard to discern."³⁰

The basis of this difficulty appears to centre on the notion of *figurae*. Iconic *figurae* are like phonemes in that they are themselves meaningless until combined into signs, but they are unlike phonemes in that they are not necessarily discrete and differentially determined. This makes the codified units of the image difficult to identify. Eco says that discrete units may be isolated from an iconic continuum, but they are not organized into a system of rigid differences like that of the language.

For this reason the second articulation of the iconic code [the sign] appears as a continuum of possibilities from which many individual messages emerge, decipherable within the context, but not reducible to a precise code. In fact the code is not yet recognizable, but this is not to say it is

³⁰Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 214.

absent. At least we know this: if we alter the connection between figures beyond a certain limit, the conditions of perception can no longer be denoted.³¹

Eco recognizes the difficulty in reducing images to the articulatory elements that make possible semiotic analyses. But he is not forced to Metz's conclusion that the cinema consists of the combination of non-analyzable 'blocks of reality'. On the contrary, Eco makes the bold proposal of a *triple articulation* of the cinematic code. A triple articulation is unique to the cinema; no other semiotic system is triply articulated. It is provided for by the fact that the cinema not only gives us images, but it gives us *moving* images. Eco states:

...according to Prieto it is difficult to imagine such a type of code for, in order to have a third articulation unit, one needs a sort of *hyper-unit* (the etymology is the same of 'hyperspace') composed of 'signs' of the more analytical articulation so that its analytical components are not parts of the content that the hyper-unit conveys (in the same way in which *figurae* are analytical components of signs but the former are not conveying a part of the meaning of the latter).³²

Eco finds such a *hyper-unit* in the motion conveyed by the succession of single frames. Within the frame, images are doubly articulated, with non-significant *figurae* combining to form significant, visually recognizable signs.

³¹Eco in Nichols 597-8.

³²Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 233.

But in passing from the frame to the shot, these signs are combined to simulate motion in which meaningful gestures, or *kinesic* signs, are created. In the cinema, Eco argues, kinesic signs can be broken down into discrete *kinesic figurae*. He says that this is less possible in everyday life, where it is difficult to isolate discrete units of movement in the gestural continuum. For Eco, kinesic figurae represent a true articulation because, though constitutive of kinesic signs (or *kines*), they do not share in their meaning. That is, a large number of meaningless units of movement can combine to form meaningful units of gesture:

The camera decomposes kines precisely into a number of discrete units which still on their own mean nothing, but which have differential value with respect to other discrete units. If I subdivide two typical head gestures into a number of photograms [frames] (eg. the signs 'yes' and 'no'), I find various positions which I can't identify as kines 'yes' and 'no'.³³

Thus Eco postulates a triply articulated cinematic code, with figurae combining to form signs, signs combining to form kinesic figurae, and kinesic figurae combining to form gestural signs. (Problems with Eco's triple articulation are discussed later in the chapter.) Eco attributes the impression of reality in the cinema, which Metz made so much of, to the triple articulation of the cinematic code:

³³Eco in Nichols 603.

Confronted with a conventionalization so much richer, and hence a formalization so much subtler than anything else, we are shocked into believing we stand before a language which restores reality to us. And so is born a metaphysics of the cinema.³⁴

Metz and the Cinematic Sign

Eco's general semiotic principles, his critique of the image, and his triple articulation hypothesis are not without their problems. His contribution to early film semiotics is nevertheless substantial. The critique of iconicity shook the ground of the realist conception of the image that was fundamental to both Metz and Wollen. Eco's 'conventionalization' of visual, natural and motivated signs theoretically sanctioned the positing of codification--and therefore of articulation--on or below the level of the image. Eco's positing of a triple articulation of the cinematic code represents a basic departure from the strict linguistic lines of earlier semiotic theories. With Eco, semiotic systems no longer need be based on the double articulation of a Saussurean langue. Eco's propositions were seemingly in direct conflict with Metz's notion of iconic analogy, upon which basis he sought cinematic codes elsewhere than in the image. Eco's immediate contribution

³⁴Eco in Nichols 604.

was to allow the images of the cinema to be studied semiotically.

Metz quickly absorbed the core of Eco's critique into his own investigations. In the 1974 publication of *Film Language*, Metz's earlier essays, notably "Le Cinema: Langue ou Langage?", were attended by copious footnotes that attempted to incorporate many of Eco's arguments into the original thesis. His later essays, and *Language and Cinema*, more fully, but not uncritically, embrace Eco's ideas.

Eco's influence is seen most obviously in respect of Metz's theory of cinematic analogy. In Metz's earlier writings, it was the analogic nature of the cinematic sign (i.e., the quasi-fusion of the signifier and signified) that led him to speak of the cinema as a language without a language system. Insofar as the cinematic sign differed from the linguistic sign (it is motivated, natural, uncodified, i.e., expressive rather than signifying), Metz was forced to reject it as a site of semiotic analysis. Metz found the requisite codes in the *grande syntagmatique* (the large syntagmatic category of the image track). As early as 1967, however, Metz adopted the essence of Eco's critique, which was to have a fundamental influence on his subsequent work. Metz writes:

The cinematic, or photographic, image is *legible* (intelligible) only if one recognizes objects in it...and to 'recognize' is to classify...We also

know, through technological (notably televisual) studies and through informational theories of perception, that the most faithfully figurative image is analyzable into a certain number of discrete and geometrical elements (points, spots, 'lines', etc.)...Modern studies, as much as in semiotics as in the psychology of perception, cultural anthropology, or even in aesthetics, no longer make it possible to oppose as simply as in the period of Saussure the conventional, the schematic and the non-schematic; they end up rather by distinguishing *modes* and *degrees* of schematization, or, on the contrary, of iconicity.³⁵

Metz appears to fully accept Eco's 'conventionalization' of the image. This entails a fundamental revision of his former notion of analogy:

There is good reason...to recall the partial similarities between filmic perception and everyday perception (sometimes called 'real perception'), similarities that certain authors (including the present author) have sometimes misinterpreted. They are not due to the fact that the first is natural, but to the fact that the second is not; the first is codified, but its codes are in part the same as those of the second. The *analogy*, as Umberto Eco has clearly shown, is not between the effigy and its model, but exists--while remaining partial--between the two perceptual situations, between the modes of decipherment which lead to the recognition of the object in a real situation and those which lead to its recognition in an iconic situation...³⁶

Thus Metz fully accepts Eco's critique of iconicity, in which similarity or analogy are coded relations. This is an important change, and it has several consequences. The idea

³⁵Metz, *Language and Cinema* 276.

³⁶Metz 277.

of coded analogy and the possibility of systems organized by rules different than those of a language allowed Metz to abandon the semiotically discouraging idea of a cinematic message without a code. The image now becomes a 'true' sign in the sense of possessing codifications that participate in a system. Metz can now speak of a cinematic *language system* (in the more general sense of code), an idea that he was earlier forced to abandon. Metz had made a distinction between expression and signification that corresponded to the distinctions between motivated and arbitrary and natural and cultural (which Eco had repudiated). Images, for Metz, were expressive; their meaning was derived naturally from the thing expressed, without recourse to a code. But with Eco's theory of the lie, and the demonstration that analogy is coded, Metz's notion of the expressive image became untenable. In a note attached to the passage in which he originally made the distinction between expression and signification, he responds:

Today, I would say rather that expressiveness is a meaning established without recourse to a *special* and explicit code. But not without recourse to vast and complex sociocultural *organizations*, which are represented by other forms of codification. In general, if the sum of the effects of meaning we call *expressive*, or *motivated*, or *symbolic*, etc., appears to be "natural"--and it is indeed so in a certain way, for example to a phenomenology or a psychology of meaning--it is mainly because the effects are very deeply rooted in cultures, and because they are rooted at that level that, in these cultures, lies

far beyond the various explicit, specialized, and properly informative codes...Thus, as a paradoxical consequence, the deepest cultural codifications are experienced as the most natural.³⁷

Thus the cinema becomes a meeting-place of a multiplicity of codes--perceptual codes, codes of recognition, codes of gesture, symbolism, in other words, all the cultural significance that is already invested in the filmed spectacle--in addition to the specifically cinematic codification. Drawing on Eco's suggestion that as many as ten codes may be operating within the image, Metz now adopts a *pluricodal* conception of cinematic meaning. It is interesting to note that analogy as Metz originally conceived it prohibited a semiotics of the image by denying its codification. In its revised form after Eco, the theory of analogy justifies the claim of multiple codifications in the cinema.

Brian Henderson argues that Metz's overall position is so bound up with the notion of iconic analogy that any attempt to incorporate Eco's ideas would bring down the entire structure.³⁸ Metz's position is no doubt substantially revised, but he is able to contain the potentially disruptive effects of Eco's arguments by making

³⁷FL 78 fn.

³⁸Henderson 178.

a distinction between cinematic and extra-cinematic codes. He tentatively proposes (without pretense to an exhaustive list) the co-mingling of five signifying systems in the cinema: (1) perceptual codes, (2) codes of recognition and identification, (3) codes of symbolism and connotation, (4) general narrative codes belonging to a culture, and (5) properly cinematic codes.³⁹ The first four have nothing to do with the codes of the cinema: they are extra-cinematic. They occur in the cinema "under cover" of analogy and are not organized by the cinematic language system. Metz now argues that while his rejection of codification in the images was indeed wrong, his earlier findings stand (e.g., the *grande syntagmatique*) since his search was for the codes that are *unique* to the cinema. Although analogy now makes possible the coexistence of multiple signifying systems in the cinema, the concept can still serve to elucidate the specific codes of the cinematographic language:

Contrary to what I believed four years ago (notably in "The Cinema: Language or Language System?"), it does not seem at all impossible to me, today, to assume that *analogy is itself coded without, however, ceasing to function authentically as analogy in relation to the codes of the superior level--which are brought into play only on the basis of this first assumption.*⁴⁰

³⁹Metz, *Language and Cinema* 34.

⁴⁰FL 111-2.

Eco's critique of the image thus does not cause Metz to abandon the theory of analogy. In fact, by making analogy a matter of cultural convention, it no longer provides a 'stumbling block', which Metz had acknowledged, to the development of film semiotics.

Eco's influence is also palpable in Metz's revision of his notion of a cinematographic language, in particular with regard to the status of the *grande syntagmatique*. The *grande syntagmatique* is the code governing the sequencing of images into meaningful discourse. It develops out of Metz's original theory of analogy. Images lack the distinctiveness, the codification, and the articulations necessary to submit them to semiotic analysis. Semiotics must therefore look toward the large syntagmatic units or types of image sequences that can be used to build a narrative; these comprise the *grande syntagmatique*. In "The Cinema: Language or Language System?", Metz had argued that the cinema constitutes a language precisely insofar as the images are so ordered. It is thus implied that the *grande syntagmatique* constitutes what is language-like about the cinema. The *grande syntagmatique* is treated as if it were the code of cinematographic language. Yet elsewhere in *Film Language*, Metz suggests that it is only one code among many. This ambiguity has been the focus of much criticism. In *Language and Cinema*, Metz acknowledges his vacillation:

In our *Essais sur la signification au cinema* [*Film Language*], we studied a certain sub-code of montage, the large syntagmatic category ('*grande syntagmatique*') of the picture-track...in certain passages the importance of this code in relation to the ensemble of the cinematic material is clearly overestimated, and the idea that one could really be dealing, if not with the single code of the cinema, at least with a privileged and particularly central code was not sufficiently avoided. This vascillation explains, and justifies in part, some of the criticism which have been levelled against us, and which nevertheless remains unfounded...However, the expose did intrinsically lay itself open to these criticisms, to the extent that it failed to establish explicitly enough the pluricodal nature of the cinema, such that the only code (or rather sub-code) which, in the passages in question, was studied in detail tended to appear, from a somewhat hurried reading, as the only code of the cinema.⁴¹

Cinematic language is now explicitly acknowledged as involving several codes. The grand syntagmatique, which in *Film Language* seemed to be the chief conclusion of Metz's analyses, now becomes one code among many--indeed a sub-code of the code of montage. The cinematic language system thus becomes a composite of other systems, an ensemble of codes, some specific to the cinema, others not. The codes that constitute the cinematic language system (montage, camera movements, filmic 'punctuation', points of view, etc) combine, by virtue of visual and verbal analogy, with sundry extracinematic codes to produce what we know as the cinema.

⁴¹Metz 189.

Eco's hypothesis that the cinematic code is triply articulated conflicted with Metz's position that the cinema lacked articulations. As in the case of analogy, Metz attempts to diminish the significance of the conflict while absorbing the core of Eco's proposal. He argues that in his rejection of the double articulation in the cinema, he was referring to specifically *linguistic* articulations. He reaffirms that cinematographic language has nothing resembling the double articulation of verbal languages, but that this is not to say the cinema lacks articulations.⁴² He thus acknowledges Eco's point that semiotic systems need not be articulated according to the laws of a Saussurean langue.

Eco's critique of the image and the dogma of the double articulation served to distance Metz further away from the language-based semiology of Saussure. The Saussurean problems of the motivated and visual sign are more easily overcome. But perhaps Eco's greatest contribution to early film semiotics gave rise to arguments that Metz was able to use against Eco himself. Eco's critique of the image allowed Metz to posit a pluricodal cinematic language. Thus, Metz argues, the various codes of the cinema may be variously

⁴²FL 62 fn.

articulated. Metz is thus able to criticise Eco's triple articulation on the basis that it posits a *single*, primary cinematic code. Metz does not discard Eco's rather ingenious idea of a triple articulation. Rather, he argues that instead of applying to the code of the cinema, it applies to a cinematic sub-code, the technological code that governs the mechanical simulation of motion.⁴³

Metz's critique of Eco relates to the very notion of a cinematic sign and its identification with the *minimal unit* of the cinema. Towards the end of *Language and Cinema*, Metz asserts:

There is no *cinematic sign*. This notion, like that of 'pictorial sign,' 'musical signs', etc., stems from a naive classification which proceeds according to material units (*langages*) and not by units of a logical order (codes): a fanaticism of specificity which is not without some metaphysical notions...In the cinema (or elsewhere) no sovereign code exists which imposes its minimal units, which are always the same, on all parts of

⁴³Eco's formulation of a triple articulation, though ingenious, was problematic from the start. Eco argued that the triple articulation obtains in the cinema rather than in everyday life because in life it is difficult to discretely analyze movement. "Not so for the camera," he says. However, it is difficult to see how life differs from the cinema in this respect, since a film isn't normally watched frame by frame. As Metz says "...the cinema is not a machine for the purpose of combining photograms, but rather for suppressing them and rendering them imperceptible." *Language and Cinema* 191. It is also unclear how Eco would answer the problem of video, which does not simulate movement by combining discrete shots of incremental motion. Eco, then, could not consider video to share the triple articulation of film, a dubious conclusion, given their obvious similarities. Metz's proposal appears to answer these difficulties.

all films. These films, on the contrary, have a textual surface--which is temporal and spatial--a fabric in which multiple codes come to segment, each for itself, their minimal units which, throughout the entire length of the filmic discourse, are superimposed, overlap, and intersect without their boundaries necessarily coinciding.⁴⁴

Metz emphasizes that the cinematic sign or minimal unit is a posited entity; it does not exist in the film prior to analysis. It belongs to the specific code one is studying, not to the cinematic language in general. Depending on the code in question, the minimal unit may vary in size and form. "To the multiplicity of codes there corresponds a multiplicity of minimal units."⁴⁵ Metz says that the error lies in confusing the 'sign' of a specific code with the cinematic 'sign' in general. Thus for Eco, the frame is taken to be the minimal unit of the cinematic code, whereas, as Metz points out, it is in fact only the unit of a sub-code (the technological sub-code). Metz admits his own guilt in this respect. The primacy accorded to the *grande syntagmatique* was a mistake, he admits, partially based on the search for the single, sovereign sign of the cinema. The metaphysics Metz mentions above can also be considered self-critical, pertaining to the realist conception of the image that Eco helped him to repudiate.

⁴⁴Metz 194.

⁴⁵Metz 194.

The problem with the notion of a cinematic sign is that, since Saussure, it carries with it the idea that it is a single type, finite in number, stable, and discrete. With Eco's contribution it is apparent that few--if any--such signs exist in the cinema (or elsewhere). Such a conception of the sign has handicapped the development of film semiotics. Metz says:

One sometimes has the impression that each author has his own minimal unit, and it is astonishing that, in so few years of research, so many minimal units (or types of articulations) have been proposed, each of which was believed to be the only true one. The reason for this is that each author was thinking of a particular code or group of codes, which he more or less clearly identified with the cinematic fact in its entirety.⁴⁶

Metz even suggests that the realist and formalist theories were the result of a search for the single defining code of the cinema, the code of montage for the formalists, the code of the image for the realists.⁴⁷ It could be argued that Eco's critique of the image in some sense resolves the realism/formalism debate, in that the theoretical principles it encouraged in Metz do not value any particular code over another.

Metz's declaration that there is no cinematic sign is essentially rhetorical: to reject signs in the cinema is to

⁴⁶Metz 188.

⁴⁷FL 41.

reject film semiotics. It is rather a rejection of the sign as defined in classical semiology. If, Metz says, a sign were defined simply as the smallest commutable element still having meaning (without the 'adventitious' linguistic connotations mentioned above), there would be no problem in "considering a camera movement as a sign--even if its value varies considerably from one sub-code or one textual system to another--since this camera movement always has a meaning, and since, in the code of camera movements, it is the smallest movement which has one."⁴⁸

Metz's skepticism regarding the cinematic sign does not extend to semiotic theory in general, however. He argues that the identification of the minimal units of cinematic codes is not essential to the advancement of semiotic theory. The relevant units of the cinematic codes will gradually become known as the codes themselves are elucidated and understood. Semiotics still has a long way to go, says Metz. The difficulty in identifying the cinematic sign, is not, as critics charge, an argument against the appropriateness of the semiotic approach to the cinema. The absence of easily identifiable minimal units in the cinema is not proof that there can be no semiotics of the cinema. It is, rather, a further demonstration that the cinema is

⁴⁸Metz 206.

not organized like verbal language, and that the units of a langue are not necessarily the units of other semiotic systems. To deny the existence of the cinematic sign, the search for which may be said to characterize Metz's initial project, is not, then, to be forced to abandon semiotics. It is rather to affirm in a new light Metz's original thesis that the cinema is un langage sans langue.

CONCLUSION

Semiotics is the study of signs. It makes sense, then, that a major thrust in early attempts to establish a semiotics of the cinema was to identify the signs of the cinema. But the attempt to find the signs of the cinema proved daunting.

Semioticians have long sought to generalize their project from the study of language out of which semiotics arose. With Jakobson, verbal art became "semiotic fact," and poetry became fair semiotic game. Barthes's work on literature, Propp's on folktales, and Levi-Strauss's on myth further expanded the realm of semiotic inquiry. But semiotics was not content to confine its study to language-based phenomena. It had grander ambitions. For many semioticians, semiotics can and should encompass all forms of social communication, and this includes visual forms.

But the attempt to extend semiotic theory to visual forms of communication encountered a formidable obstacle: the image. From Saussure's pioneering work at the turn of the century, the semiotic sign was defined in accordance with the principles of structural linguistics. Saussure's "ideal" semiotic sign was, like the linguistic sign, arbitrary and conventional. It was upon these principles

that Saussure constructed his theory of semiology. According to contemporary wisdom, the photographic image was clearly not such a sign. It was motivated and natural. Any semiotic theory based on the principles of structural linguistics would have a difficult time dealing with the photographic medium.

Christian Metz, the first to apply Saussurean semiological principles to the cinema, recognized the problem. For him, the photograph was a natural sign; it was a slice of reality, a message without a code. A semiotics of the cinema, then, must conform to the exigencies of its subject matter. If the image was not amenable to semiotic study, then semiotics must turn away from these units without a langue and study the manner in which images are linked together. Only in the conventionalized ordering of images into meaningful narrative sequences do semiotic codes reside. Only in the large syntagmatic units can semiotics find a foothold.

But Metz's results were clearly unsatisfactory, as his critics were quick to point out. How could a semiotics of the cinema worthy of the name neglect the image, the chief vehicle of cinematic meaning? Peter Wollen responded by attempting to incorporate into his structural approach the semiotic ideas of Peirce, whose conceptual scheme did not exclude natural and motivated signs, and could thus

accommodate the photographic image. Wollen believed that Peirce's sign trichotomy of icon, index, and symbol could explain cinematic signification and duly establish the image as the sign of the cinema.

Eco argued that Peirce's idea of object motivation that underlies his trichotomy is incompatible with semiotic theory. For Eco, there is no such thing as a message without a code; all meaning is conventional. Eco's critique of iconicity and his proposal of a triple articulation in the cinema represented a departure both from the strict linguistic lines of Saussure and from the object motivation of Peirce. With Eco's contribution, signs, in order to be signs at all, need not be the distinct, arbitrary, linear signs of a Saussurean langue. By the end of the early film semiotic period, prior to the introduction of the ideas of Freud and Lacan, the cinema was conceptualized as an ensemble of codes, some specific to the cinema, others belonging to the culture at large, each comprised of minimal units not necessarily discrete or arbitrary, and not necessarily identifiable. These are the signs of the cinema. Although the initial problem of explicitly identifying these minimal units remains, semiotic theory no longer depends on the discovery of a single sovereign sign for justification.

Film semiotics is a viable approach only if it abandons the dogma of a Saussurean langue governing all cultural

meaning, as well as the metaphysical notion of natural or object motivation. Rid of such adventitious ideas, semiotics represents a valid approach to the study of the cinema.

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