

## Semiotics and the Cinema: Metz and Wollen

In addition to his work on semiotics and cinema in response to Christian Metz, included here, Gilbert Harman had published widely on ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of language and mind. Harman shares the belief of W. V. Quine that philosophy and science are continuous as well as Quine's skepticism about conceptual analysis. As a moral philosopher he is best known for his explanatory argument for anti-realism and for his defense of ethical relativism, most recently expounded in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (1996), in which he debates the issue with Judith Jarvis Thomson. Among his major publications are *Thought* (1973); *The Nature of Morality* (1977); *Reasoning, Meaning and Mind* (1990); and, with S. Kulkarni, *Reliable Reasoning: Induction and Statistical Learning Theory* (2007). Harman, who was awarded the Jean Nicod Prize in Paris (2005), is currently Stuart professor of philosophy at Princeton University.

Some film theorists advocate what they call a semiotics or semiology of the cinema. I will discuss two somewhat different proposals of this sort here, one by Christian Metz<sup>1</sup> and another by Peter Wollen.<sup>2</sup>

The term *semiotics* (and, equivalently, the term *semiology*) means theory of signs. Linguistics is one such theory, since it is the theory of language-as-a-system-of-signs. The semiotics of the cinema is, similarly, the theory of film-as-a-system-of-signs. The idea is that we are to think of film as a kind of language and are to try to develop a linguistics of this language of film.

This means, according to Christian Metz, that we will only be interested in certain aspects of film. We will be concerned only with the various ways in which particular films can have meaning and significance for normal spectators. We will be directly concerned with the nature of the film image, the relation between sound and image, and the effect of various kinds of editing. We will not be directly concerned with such things as camera mechanisms, the process of developing and printing films, or the technological structure of the film industry.

There are, of course, very different kinds of films: narrative feature films, documentaries, travel films, advertising films, instructional films, abstract underground films, and so forth. Metz argues, however, that in the first instance we should restrict

<sup>1</sup>*Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinéma* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), a translation of *Essais sur la Signification au Cinéma*, Tome I. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968, 2nd ed. 1971). *Language and Cinema* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), a translation of *Language et Cinéma* (Paris: Larousse, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>*Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Indiana University Press, 3rd rev. ed. 1972).

our study to narrative feature films and ignore the other type of film. According to Metz, before the narrative film existed, the cinema was conceived as a mere technological resource, a recorder of events, and "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." Narrative feature films are, furthermore, what we first think of as films. Shorts of various kinds inhabit "border regions"; their signifying procedures are, for the most part, derived from those in narrative films. We will therefore not go wrong, Metz thinks, if we restrict our attention to the signifying procedures that are used in feature length narrative films.

Moreover, Metz says, we should study denotation before connotation. We should study, that is, the ways in which various aspects of plot are presented before we study how symbolic, philosophical, and human messages are presented and before we study such things as style, genre, and poetic mood. Denotation is basic, according to Metz, because, in the first instance, the basic materials of the film—its sounds and images—present a series of events that constitute the plot or story. That is what is denoted. In other words, the basic material of the film is directly a sign of the denotation, according to Metz. Connotation is secondary in the sense that it is not directly presented by the basic materials of the film in the way that the denotation or plot is. Connotation is, in fact, partly indicated by the denotation. What happens in the film has a certain significance, given the way in which it is presented. This significance is connotation. The connotation is what is signified by a sign when the sign combines aspects of the basic materials of the film and the story that those aspects denote.

We are, therefore, to ask first how narrative films present their plots. In particular, "How does the cinema indicate successivity, precession, temporal breaks, causality, adversative relationships, consequence, spatial proximity or distance, etc.? These are central questions to the semiotics of the cinema."

A similar group of questions can be raised about language. 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 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.

One big difference, though, as Metz observes, is that linguistic denotation is largely conventional. The word *horse* denotes horses and *man* denotes men; but it could have been otherwise. The word *man* could have denoted horses and *horse* could have denoted men. The sentence *the man is on the horse* has a conventional meaning which depends on its grammatical structure and the meanings of its words. It denotes a situation in which a man is on a horse. If different conventions were in force it might denote a situation in which a horse is on a man. The sentence by itself has no natural meaning, apart from convention, and it can be understood only by someone who is acquainted with the relevant conventions. In the case of film, the situation is quite different. A shot of a man on a horse has an immediate and natural interpretation that does not depend on any filmic conventions.

There is, furthermore, according to Metz, an important sense in which film does not have a syntax. No significant unit in film corresponds to the word in language. The smallest unit of film—the image—is already at the level of the sentence or paragraph. A shot of a revolver does not correspond to the word *revolver* but to the sentence *here is a revolver* or even to a description of the revolver. There cannot be an ungrammatical shot, in the way that there can be an ungrammatical sequence of words.

There are, nevertheless, certain rules and conventions, or “codes,” which narrative feature films exploit in order to indicate their denotations, and it is the task of film semiotics, as Metz conceives it, to specify these codes and say how they work. There are certain conventions of filmic punctuation, concerning the interpretation of a fade as opposed to a dissolve, for example. Or, to take another example, Metz suggests that films are made up of a series of minimal sequences that he calls “syntagmas.” Syntagmas can be distinguished on the basis of montage and what that montage signifies. A series of different views of a house, for example, might constitute what Metz calls a “descriptive syntagma”—showing what the house is like and not presenting an event unfolding in time. Another series of shots showing various effects of war would constitute what he calls a “bracket syntagma”—in which a number of things are grouped together because of a certain association among those things. A third series might show alternating shots of two different actions, indicating that they are happening simultaneously, for example, alternating shots of the two parties at the opposite ends of a telephone conversation—or alternating shots of pursuer and pursued. And so on. According to Metz, there are only a small number of other possible syntagmas.

Having gone this far, Metz sees the following tasks on the immediate horizon. First, we must attempt to discover the various denotative codes that are exploited in films; and we must classify these codes in terms of their generality. Some of them are relevant to narration in general; some to any sort of depiction, including painting; some only to photographic images; some only to sequences of images, as in comic strips; some only to sequences of moving photographic images correlated with sound; and so forth. As film semioticians, we are to be particularly concerned with codes that are specific to film. These, as previously indicated, will concern mainly such things as filmic punctuation, the various syntagmas, and the meanings of close-ups, zoom shots, and so on.

Second, having carried out that part of our study, we can then begin to investigate questions of style and genre by seeing what subcodes out of the codes available are used in works of that style or genre. We might consider, for example, the codes of dress, behavior, and landscape, that define the western. Or we can study the sorts of codes a particular director or group of directors tends to use.

This summarizes Metz's proposal. What can we say about it? One immediate difficulty is that his order of priorities depends to a considerable extent on his distinction between denotation and connotation. We are to study denotation first, ignoring connotation for the time being. The difficulty is that Metz's definition of the denotation-connotation distinction does not work and it is unclear that there is any way to fix up his definition so as to support his program. He says that the

denotation—the series of events of plot portrayed—is what is signified directly by the raw material—images and sound—of the film, whereas connotation is what is signified by the events portrayed plus the way they are signified. But, typically, in order to understand what is happening in the film even at the level of plot, you need to have some understanding of what else has been happening at that level. Most aspects of the plot—who a depicted person is, where the person is going, whom he loves, whom he is betraying, etc.—are indicated not just by image and sound but by other aspects of plot as well. Metz's definition would make these aspects part of connotation rather than denotation. These are, moreover, central aspects of plot, in Metz's own terms, not just aspects suggested or hinted at. Consider, for example, how we are to identify one or another of Metz's syntagmas. A simple scene depicting a conversation with alternating shots of whoever is speaking, coheres as a simple scene rather than as one of Metz's bracket syntagmas, say, not because of aspects of image and sound alone but because the denotation of the various shots allows us to suppose that we are seeing shots of a single event. In order to determine what sort of syntagma is occurring, you need to know not only how many shots there are and what sorts of characteristics the shots have as visual and auditory images but also what the denotations of the shots are. So Metz's definition of the connotation denotation distinction cannot be used for his purposes.

Nor can he say simply that he wants, first, to restrict himself to examining the semiotic mechanisms by which the story of the film is indicated. That 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.

Nor is this criticism of Metz merely theoretical. For, in fact, although Metz has been developing his account of "film language" for over a decade in many articles and in three large books, his analysis remains almost entirely programmatic. The only substantive results that he has achieved concern his classification of syntagmas, a classification that is in my opinion of minimal interest. A theoretical program that leads to so little in practice is clearly suspect.

This suggests that there are practical as well as theoretical reasons for the film semiotist to study exactly those aspects of film signification that Metz assigns to connotation, and this is what Peter Wollen proposes to do. Wollen believes, as Metz does, that the study of film should take the form of a semiotics of the cinema. But he disagrees with Metz's priorities. He suggests that Metz's emphasis on how plot is presented is due to a commitment to realism in the cinema and, furthermore, that this commitment reflects a mistake in semiotics. In order to bring out the nature of this error, we must, according to Wollen, develop semiotics in accordance with the theory of signs envisioned by the American philosopher C. S. Peirce. In particular,

we must recall Peirce's distinction between three aspects of a sign: iconic, indexical, and symbolic.

A sign is an *icon* to the extent that its significance depends on the inner nature of the sign—typically, some sort of qualitative or structural resemblance between the sign and what it signifies. Paintings, diagrams, and color samples are predominantly icons. A sign is an *index* to the extent that its significance depends on a real connection between the sign and what it signifies. Proper names, demonstrative pronouns, evidence at the scene of a crime, and symptoms of a disease are predominantly indices. Finally, a sign is a *symbol*, in Peirce's special sense of this term, to the extent that its significance depends on human convention or an arbitrary decision. Labels on diagrams, Chinese ideograms, and English words are predominantly symbols in this sense.

Most signs have more than one aspect. A sentence of English will have a symbolic aspect because of the conventions on which the meanings of its word depend. It will have an indexical aspect if it contains proper nouns, which have the significance they do because of a real connection between name and thing named. And, according to Peirce, the sentence will have an iconic aspect since its significance depends in part on its logical-grammatical structure, which is an internal property of the sentence and is relevant to what other sentences logically imply or are implied by it.

A photograph has an indexical aspect; what it pictures depends to a large extent on a real connection between the picture and the object photographed. It also has an iconic aspect because of the resemblance between the picture and what is pictured. There may also be a symbolic aspect to the photograph if, for example, the subject matter is identifiable by appeal to some sort of convention or stipulation.

So far, this is simply Peirce's classification of signs. Given this classification Wollen observes, "In the cinema, it is quite clear, indexical and iconic aspects are by far the most powerful. The symbolic is limited and secondary." But, it is, according to Wollen, exactly the "submerged" secondary aspects of signs that assume importance in art. Since in the cinema "it is the symbolic which is the submerged dimension, we should therefore expect that in the 'poetry' of the cinema, this aspect will be manifested more palpably."

Metz's error, according to Wollen, is to take the linguistic analogy too seriously, thus overlooking the fact that film is primarily iconic and indexical rather than symbolic. Metz looks for conventions in film that bear some resemblance to the conventions of language. But that is to miss the point that the role of conventional symbols or codes in film is different from its role in language. The basic linguistic codes are needed for literal significance. The relevant codes in cinema primarily concern the poetic rather than the literal.

Wollen's first conclusion is, therefore, the opposite of Metz's. As film semioticians, our primary task must be to uncover the codes exploited in films in producing the sort of poetry that films can produce. We must do this, moreover, remembering that signs combine all three of Peirce's aspects of significance, iconic, indexical, and symbolic.

Wollen's next point is that although signs are often used to communicate messages, they are not always used in that way and are not used that way in films. A scientist working out the implications of a theory, a mathematician doing a calculation, and a traveller planning an itinerary are all using signs, but not to communicate with anyone. They are, as it were, seeing the implications of certain signs. Similarly, a poet, an artist, and a film director are using signs but not to communicate any sort of message. To suppose that they are is simply to make a mistake about what they are doing. They, like the mathematician, scientist, and traveller, are using signs for a different purpose. Like them, they are constructing signs in order to see what the implications of those signs are.

Wollen therefore rejects Metz's idea that the purpose of film semiotics is "to study the ordering and functionings of the main signifying units used in the filmic message." Metz's proposal is due to his linguistic analogy. Language is often used to communicate messages but film is not normally used in that way. Films have meaning and significance but they do not carry messages—any more than other works of art.

According to Wollen, works of art exploit and call attention to various codes. The greatest works "interrogate" their own codes by pitting them against each other. "We know that *Don Quixote* was destructive of the chivalric romance . . . that *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake* are destructive of the nineteenth century novel. . . . A valuable work, a powerful work, at least, is one which challenges codes, overthrows established ways of reading or looking, not simply to establish new ones, but to compel an unending dialogue, not at random but productively." Wollen goes on to argue that an analysis along these lines can enable us to see what is great about a director like Godard.

Both Metz and Wollen believe, then, that the theory of film must become part of semiotics, although they disagree slightly about the nature of semiotics. For Metz, "the methods of linguistics . . . provide the semiotics of the cinema with a constant and precious aid in establishing units that, although they are still very approximate, are liable over time (and, one hopes, through the work of many scholars) to become progressively refined." For Wollen, this appeal to linguistics is an error. We must rely, rather, on Peirce's general theory of signs, which allows us to see that filmic significance is very different from linguistic signification, and allows us to understand why the role of codes in films is different from the primary role that linguistic codes play in the everyday use of language. Still, Wollen endorses the idea that we ought "to dissolve cinema criticism and cinema aesthetics into a special province of the general science of signs." The differences between Wollen and Metz are then really matters of emphasis rather than anything else. Their first priorities are different. But Metz would agree with Wollen that it is important to discover the various symbolic codes that give film its importance as a work of art; and Wollen can agree that there is *some* point to specifying the significance of close-ups, zoom shots, filmic punctuation, and Metz's syntagmas.

I now want to look more closely at the idea, endorsed by both Metz and Wollen, that films exploit certain codes. What do they mean by codes?

The word *code* as it is ordinarily used is ambiguous. It can mean either cipher or standards. We speak in one sense of messages in code and in another sense of the military code and of codes of dress. Metz and Wollen use the term in a way that appears to combine both of these senses. On the one hand, they speak of decoding works of art and they take codes to be systems of signs with meanings. Here *code* would seem to mean cipher. To decode is to decipher. What would it mean to decode (in this sense) actions done in accordance with the military code? On the other hand, Metz and Wollen also speak, without any sign that they are using the term in a different sense, of codes of dress and even musical codes.

Now, in what sense are there musical codes? Certainly not in the sense of ciphers. Instrumental music does not encode messages. A piano solo does not in any obvious way have meaning. It does not represent, indicate, or signify anything. There are various musical structures, of course, and we might speak of these or of the principles of structure as codes, but that is certainly stretching a point. We would not normally speak of symphonic or fugal codes.

But then what counts as decoding music? Apparently that is supposed to be figuring out what the structure of a piece of music is, hearing it as having a certain structure, hearing what there is to hear in the music. Similarly, to decode a style of dress—the style of dress in westerns, for example—is first to uncover the dress code that is involved and then, perhaps, to indicate the meaning or significance of that code.

In this usage, then, any sort of system or structure might be called a code; to decode a work is to uncover the various structures that are relevant to it and appreciate their significance for the work in question. Furthermore, any system of assumptions, beliefs, ideology, or stereotypes that is relied on or alluded to in a film or other work of art can be called a code. For, to “decode” the work is also to see how its significance is affected by such things.

What is the point of this usage? Why call all these different things codes, especially when they are not all codes in the same sense of the term and some are not codes at all in any ordinary sense of the term? The answer is that Metz and Wollen are cheating. Their usage disguises the fact that much of aesthetics and criticism is properly concerned with something other than the significance of signs. Instrumental music is not a language, a system of signs. It has no meaning. It does not represent or signify anything. An understanding of musical structure plays a role in our appreciation of music, but that is not to say that an understanding of the significance of musical signs plays a role in our appreciation of music.

Much the same is true of our understanding and appreciation of films. To appreciate something about the structure of a film is not necessarily to appreciate something that functions as a sign. To say, for example, that the love triangle functions as a specific code in the films of Max Ophüls<sup>3</sup> is to say no more than that the love triangle is a feature of many of Max Ophüls's films and to say it in a way that wrongly suggests that you are saying something semiotic. Once this is

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Dudley Andrew “Semiology and Film: A Discussion of Metz,” *University Film Study Center Newsletter Supplement* 5, no. 3, p. 4 (Cambridge, MA).

clear, it is obvious that neither Metz nor Wollen has given any reason at all for identifying film theory with film semiotics—indeed it is or should be clear that there is nothing to be said for such an identification.

Of course, even if film theory cannot be *identified* with the semiotics of the cinema, the semiotics of the cinema might be a useful subject in its own right. But there are ample reasons for skepticism about this. Both Metz and Wollen envision a science of signs. What makes them think that there is such a science or could be one? What are its laws? Its principles? To be sure, there is Peirce's distinction between the iconic, indexical, and symbolic aspects of signs. You can spend a considerable amount of time separating out the relevant components in various cases. That can be fun, for a while, but it does not constitute a science.

Part of the problem is that Peirce's use of the term *sign* is a technical one, which counts as signs rather different sorts of things. Words are not normally signs in any ordinary sense of the term *sign*, nor are pictures or diagrams; and the sense in which road signs are signs is different from the sense in which smoke is a sign of fire. It is by no means obvious that there is a unitary phenomenon to be captured in a theory of signs in Peirce's sense.

Smoke means fire and the word *combustion* means fire, but not in the same sense of *means*. The word *mean* is ambiguous. To say smoke means fire is to say that smoke is a symptom, sign, indication, or evidence of fire. To say that the word *combustion* means fire is to say that people use the word to mean fire. The word is not normally a symptom, sign, indication, or evidence of fire; on the other hand, people do not normally use smoke to mean fire. Furthermore, there is no ordinary sense of the word *mean* in which a picture of a man means a man or means that man. This suggests that Peirce's theory of signs would comprise at least three rather different subjects: a theory of intended meaning, a theory of evidence, and a theory of pictorial depiction. There is no reason to think that these theories must contain common principles.

A fourth and different subject is also relevant—the study of representation. In our scientific, practical, and aesthetic thinking, we often let certain things stand for or represent others, so that relations among the first things can represent corresponding relations among the others. We do this for several reasons—to see the implications of a theory, to see how a battle went, or might go, and so forth. This sort of representation may seem to be exactly what Peirce had in mind when he spoke of signs, since the relation that leads us to let one thing stand for another might be iconic, indexical, conventional, or just arbitrary choice. But, in fact, this sort of representation is a much narrower phenomenon than what Peirce had in mind. Pictures do not ordinarily in this sense “stand for” what they depict; words do not “stand for” their meanings; and evidence does not “stand for” what it indicates.

Metz observes that in the film *M*, a loose balloon caught in overhead wires symbolizes the death of a girl whom we earlier saw always holding a balloon. Now, the earlier photographic images of the girl holding a balloon *depict* a girl holding a balloon but do not stand for or represent a girl with a balloon. The loose balloon by itself, without the wires, would be evidence of her capture and therefore her death, given the filmic context, but the balloon would not in that case

stand for or represent her, her capture, or her death. The capturing of the balloon by the wires does stand for the capturing of the girl. The balloon stands for the girl in this context. It is not clear whether the wires stand for the man who captures her; I am inclined to think not. The capturing of the balloon by the wires does not directly stand for the death of the girl. It symbolizes the death because it represents the capture which leads to her death.

Sometimes we arbitrarily let one thing stand for another; sometimes, as in the example just described, we find that it is "natural" to take a particular thing to stand for another. We might try to discover under what conditions such representation seems "natural," although there is, in fact, no reason to suppose that we will ever be able to do this.

In conclusion, let me summarize briefly. Metz and Wollen advocate replacing film theory and criticism with a semiotics of the cinema. I have tried to suggest several reasons for being doubtful about this. Many aspects of film aesthetics appear to be part of semiotics only because of an equivocation in the use of the word *code*. The theory of signs, in Peirce's sense, contains no laws or general principles; at best it contains a few categories of classification. Semiotics is really a collection of three or four disparate subjects. It is not obvious that a close study of any of these subjects will be particularly fruitful for the study of film.

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