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The Sound and the Theory: A Study of the Theoretical Position within Metzian Film Semiotics of Sound in Cinema

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THE SOUND AND THE THEORY

(TITLE)

BY

Kathryn L. Ingle

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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THE SOUND AND THE THEORY:

A STUDY OF THE THEORETICAL POSITION

WITHIN METZIAN FILM SEMIOTICS

OF SOUND IN CINEMA

by

Kathryn L. Ingle

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Speech-Communications
in the Graduate School of
Eastern Illinois University

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Thesis supervisor: Professor Douglas Bock

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify and critique
the theory of sound in film semiotics. In order to accomplish
this task, a cursory analysis of the nature and objectives of
semiotics generally and cinesemiotics especially has been
included. Direct references to the function of sound re-
cording made by pioneer film semiologist Christian Metz, as
well as others in that discipline, constitute the object of
this study. Finally, a detailed critique of the resulting
cinesemiotic position concerning sound in film evaluates
this position in light of stated goals.

As is the case with most theories of film, the aural
signifying elements-- i.e., spoken words, music and sound
effects-- receive only secondary attention in film semiotics.
Because the photographic image has historically been viewed
as the primary material of meaning in cinema, sound recording
tends to be studied as a mere supplement, dependent upon the
image track for its very existence. This attitude toward
sound cinema as expressed by respected cinesemiologists has
not yet been properly articulated, and presents a problem
area of this new theoretical and critical methodology.

While semiotics, applied to cinema, aims at a rigorous
and scientific account of meaning in films, its theoretical

stance on the issue of sound recording remains incomplete and poorly reasoned. If film semiotics is ever to achieve its objectives, it must address each signifying practice within the cinema without privilege or prejudice. That it has not done so in the particular case of sound reveals a necessary area for improvement.

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INTRODUCTION

When film writer and critic Raymond Durgnat announced the "death of cinesemiology" (with not even a whimper) in 1980,[1] he was only partially incorrect. Cinesemiology, the specific application of semiotics to film, is not dead. It is, in fact, alive and firmly entrenched in many academic departments of film, as outraged responses to Durgnat's would-be obituary show.[2] But if cinesemiology should suddenly cease, it would do so without a sound theory of sound - the audio counterpart of the visual image in cinema. This curious silence (with not more than a whimper) in cinesemiotics on the issue of sound recording diminishes its claim to offer a scientific and systematic methodology for film analysis.

Hailed by such journals as Screen and Screen Education as a radically different approach to film theory, film semiotics has demonstrated the same visual orientation as have more traditional "theories" of film.[3] While few (if any) contemporary film critics, historians, or theorists deny the variable relation of the sound and image tracks, the status of the soundtrack remains that of the poor relation. In this respect, the lack of discussion about sound cinema by film semioticians is not surprising.

Contrarily, the linguistic origins of general semiotics, which subsumes cinesemiotics, seem to have been displaced in the attempt within film semiotics to examine only the photographic image in terms of language and language systems. The virtual absence of cinesemiotic analysis of aural cinematic elements (i.e., speech, music, sound effects) is astonishing.

An effort was made, in the same year of Durgnat's pronouncement, to generate a direct response from cine-semiologists to inadequate theories regarding sound recording in cinema. The Yale French Studies publication devoted an entire issue to Sound/Cinema, and included in its film theory section four primarily semiotic discussions of sound by such noteworthies as Christian Metz and Mary Ann Doane. When combined with the sparse references to the soundtrack in early Anglo-American appropriations of film semiotics, it becomes possible to identify the position of sound as a second-class signifying cinematic practice.

The purpose of the following study is to articulate this rather confused theory of sound in film, and to critique it in light of the stated function and objectives of film semiotics. Chapter One will deal with an exposition of the project of cinesemiology. Chapter Two will present the exact statements offered by film semioticians, especially those of pioneer Christian Metz. A critique of the resulting explicit and implicit theories of sound in cinema will

constitute Chapter Three.

Because one of the virtues of cinesemiotics--precision-- is also one of its vices, a great deal of care has been taken to render obscure terminology in an understandable yet accurate manner. The term cine-semiology, film semiotics, and film semiology are used interchangeably throughout the analysis. Limiting the study to cinesemiotic theories of sound recording necessitates a fairly general explication of the linguistic semiotic heritage. The same holds true for the Marxist theoretical tradition which has engendered and sustained the project of cinesemiotics for over a decade. Marxism and semiotics cannot be adequately discussed in a study of this sort,[4] but I hope justice has been done with these complex, interrelated disciplines.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROJECT OF FILM SEMIOTICS

Ideology vs. Knowledge

The purpose of this chapter is to show that film
semiotics (cinesemiology), by definition and stated
objectives, seeks to avoid the pitfalls of ideology and to
produce instead correct, scientific knowledge about film.
Before launching into a general outline of the definitions
and goals of film semiotics, it is important to note the
philosophical underpinnings of this emerging interpretive
discipline.

Christian Metz made the first inroads into semiology
of the cinema in the mid-to-late 1960s. His work was not
available in translation until 1974, almost one year after
the British film journal Screen published a double issue
saturated with semiology in general and film semiology in
particular. Screen has been meticulously analyzed and
identified as a Marxist project.[5] As such, it is extremely
concerned with the functions of ideology within the arts,
especially the art of film. There are two definitions of
ideology that recur in Screen and/or Screen Education. In
order to understand the introductory perspective on
semiotics in Anglo-American publications, one must understand

the notion of ideology.

Philip Rosen, in his dissertation on the orientations and "position" of Screen, found the prevailing view of ideology to originate in the writings of Louis Althusser. Althusser defined the concept of ideology as "'...a system (with its own logic and rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and a role within a given society.'"[6] Rosen is careful to distinguish ideology from "correct knowledge." Ideology possesses a certain degree of knowledge, but "what does separate ideology from correct knowledge is the profoundly tacit functioning of ideology: ideology is literally a 'consciousness' of the world founded on an unconsciousness of the grounds for that 'consciousness.'"[7]

In artistic practices (as well as economic, political, and social practices), Marxists hope to reveal pervasive ideologies in order to effect cultural change through knowledge. When Rosen uses Mannheim's definition of ideology as "false consciousness",[8] the implication is that there must also exist a "true consciousness," or "correct knowledge." Acquiring such knowledge harks back to the "epistemological break" Marx advocated as a precondition for cultural change.[9] The implied goal of semiology thus places correct knowledge in opposition to ideology. This means, in the words of respected semiotician Julia Kristeva, that

semiology "is, basically, a theory of the processes of signifying, a _theory_ _of_ _knowledge_ that may become either idealist or materialist."[10]

Perhaps a cinematic example will clarify the workings of an _ideology,_ as opposed to _correct_ _knowledge_. In the film _Tootsie_ (1982), Dustin Hoffman's character is represented as a man who learns to appreciate women as a result of posing as a female. This new sensitivity is valorized in the film, though Michael Dorsey -- as himself -- treats his girlfriend with neglect, deceit, and insensitivity. The movie reinforces the image of women as beings whose happiness is determined by the proper attentions of a man. This is ideology: a _mis_representation. _Consciously,_ the audience member applauds Dorsey, not for becoming conscious of his own shortcomings, but for supporting the unconscious (but slowly changing) perception of women as emotional fodder in search of Good Samaritans. The film "worked" because Hoffman's character was _not_ a feminist. Had he been a total cad or a complete convert, as represented by his behavior, this author seriously doubts whether _Tootsie_ would have succeeded. Admittedly, his actions were human, but his shoddy treatment of Teri Garr's character _repre-_ _sents_ an undesirable human attribute.

What are the implications of all this for film semiotics? _Screen_ writer Stephen Heath summarizes it this way:

> "...semiology is conceived as
> critical science, a practice
> perpetually displacing its
> object and itself in a theo-
> retical activity that operates
> a ceaseless destruction of the
> whole ideology of representa-
> tion."[11]

These writers, like Marx, are not naive. They admit that
ideology exists in all societies and in all their respective
practices.[12] Cinematic practice is no exception. Embedded
in the above explanation is a notion that if one alters the
practice, one alters the complex social whole. If ideology
(the misrepresentation of reality) is unavoidable, how does
Marxist film theory and criticism hope to present correct
knowledge? One of the better film textbooks integrates
these two concepts quite nicely:

> "If a conflict arises over ideological
> correctness and objective reality,
> the artist's first allegiance is to
> reality, for otherwise how are the
> ideological errors of judgment and
> fact to be corrected for future
> generations? Indeed, some of the
> best socialist films...are touching
> precisely because of the conflict
> between what essentially decent
> people do in fact, and how they
> ought to behave according to strict
> ideology."[13]

The project of film semiotics, whether Marxist or not,
is to determine the "objective reality" of the processes of
cinematic signification. A detailed presentation of the
definitions of cinesemiotics will suggest that it strives
for a scientific (and, therefore, ideologically neutral)
procedure.

What is Cinesemiology?

One possible way to define "cinesemiology" is to split the term into its two components and to pose two questions: What is cinema? and What is semiology? Because the verdict is not yet in regarding the former, a more direct approach might define cinema in terms of the latter, semiology. Indeed, if one accepts the definitions of semiotics listed in subsequent paragraphs, one must recognize cinema (film) as only one branch of semiology (semiotics). What, then, is semiology?

At the outset, the problem of definition must be confronted. Any attempt to apply a rigorous analytical method to an object of study produces technical jargon, but with semiotics every definition seems to lead to more definitions, until one becomes mired in denotative/connotative obscurity. In order to avoid confusion about some of the definitions supplied in this section (e.g., semiology as "science", "signifying practice", "method"), I will offer the following observation of Louis Althusser, who, referring to psychoanalysis, wrote:

> "'If psychoanalysis is a science because it is the science of a distinct object, it is also a science with the structure of all sciences: it has a theory and a technique (method) that makes possible the knowledge and transformation of its object in a specific practice.'"[14]

If the definitions provided shift emphasis, the reason is primarily the desire of semiologists to cover all the

theoretical and practical waterfronts.

Tzvetan Todorov gives the simplest definition of semiotics as the science of signs.[15] Instantly, two attendant difficulties appear. First, a follow-up question, "What are signs?" almost asks itself. Second, since all words are signs (as later discussion will reveal), semiology is necessarily the study of itself. When it proves impossible for semiologists to maintain an objective stance concerning their own activity, one may feel disappointment but not surprise. J. Dudley Andrew summarizes the inherent disadvantages of such study, writing:

> "Semiology's extreme self-consciousness is immediately apparent, for it begins by examining its own raw material before tackling the raw material of cinema. It demands a precise understanding of its own subject and goals."[16]

Andrew also supplies a definition of film semiology, as outlined by Christian Metz, asserting that "Metz would launch a precise and rigorous study of the material conditions which allow cinema to function. His goal is nothing more nor less than the exact description of the processes of signification in the cinema."[17] Precise. Rigorous. Exact. These adjectives continually recur in semiotic scholarship, and they set up very difficult criteria.

Tedious terminological debates and almost impossibly obscure language are part and parcel of semiotics. Many

respectable film students consider semiology of the cinema a bunch of erudite nonsense. In an acrimonious letter exchange between former BFI (British Film Institute) Education head Jim Hillier and the editors of Cineaste, the latter replied as follows:

> "As for definitions, a 'cinesemiologist', in the pejorative sense...is a someone who writes theoretical gobbledygook which defies comprehension to all but a handful of other cinesemiologists."[18]

While noting the serious objectives of cinesemiology, this writer believes that its value to areas of film theory and criticism has not yet been determined. If, as Christian Metz wrote in 1967, semiotics is still in its childhood, film semiotics is in its infancy. Having briefly valorized and criticized the "science of signs", evaluation may be put aside in favor of description of how this methodology functions.

After a decade of Anglo-American scrutiny of semiotics, it appears that "any consideration of semiology in relation to the particular signifying practice of cinema passes inevitably through reference to the work of Christian Metz."[19] Contemporary readers must remember that the point of departure of film semiotics occured with the translation and publication of Metz' books Film Language and Language and Cinema in 1974. The concepts expressed in Film Language were actually written before 1967. Language and Cinema contains a more mature view of film semiotics.

Because so much of cinesemiology rests upon or originated from the writings of Christian Metz, these discourses will dominate the study.

Metz initially defined his project as "an undertaking, in the field of 'cinematographic language',...to study the orderings and functionings of the main signifying units used in the filmic message" (emphasis added).[20] Use of the term "filmic" will be explained below. Suffice it to say Metz uses the word in a non-generic sense. He further called semiotics the "general study of significations."[21] For the sake of simplicity, I will adopt Ferdinand deSaussure's original definition of semiology as a general science of signs.[22] Roland Barthes cautiously adds that semiotics is still a "tentative science."[23] The same author nicely relates the semiotic enterprise to cinema, among other signifying media:

> "Semiology...aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention, or public enter-tainment. These constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification."[24]

Barthes' excellent synopsis, which pre-dated Film Language, almost predicted the failure of Metz' field of "cine-matographic language", which Metz doggedly tried to formulate. Concentrating instead on systems of signifi-

cation within cinema, perhaps Metz would not have so casually banished analysis of speech in cinema to the province of linguistics. The image as sign commandeered film semiotics for over ten years, despite Metz' own exposition upon the material means of expression within film. Quite simply, "cinematic discourse depends on five different sensory orders: the visual image, the musical sound, the verbal sounds of speech, sound effects, and the graphic form of credits" (emphasis added).[25] Metz chose to zero in on the succession of film images in order to determine its potential as language or language system. These two concepts are essential in Saussure's semiotics, but to understand them one must first grasp the nature of the sign.

Saussure was first a linguistics scholar and second a semiotician. His semiotics borrowed from linguistics in many respects: terminology, paradigms, structures, etc. Because Metz adopted Saussure's approach, most film semiologists absorbed the Saussurian "sign" in their discourses. This is crucial to the film student not versed in linguistics, and to the present study. There are other definitions of the sign and of semiotics which came from various innovators in this area, such as: American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce and Charles Morris; Carl Jung, Eric Buyssen; German philosopher Ernst Cassirer.[26] Due to terminological disparities, it is important to know which system is being used.

The scope of this study does not permit more than the most cursory review of semiotic fundamentals. Subsequent discussion will endeavor to explain the concept of the sign, the langue/parole dichotomy, and the arbitrary/motivated aspects of signs.

For Saussure, a sign is composed of a union of signifier and signified. The example Barthes gives to clarify the unitary aspect compares the relation of signifier/signified to the front and back sides of a sheet of paper.[27] Perhaps of greater interest is what Saussure leaves out of the sign as a representation: the "real-world material which corresponds to the other two elements and is thus the represented."[28] At this initial stage, the problem of a primarily-linguistic approach to cinematic signification emerges.

Extending Barthe's example may prove helpful. In the case of the two-sided sheet of paper (signifier/signified), you can't have one without the other. In cinema signification, you can't have those without the real-world material Philip Rosen calls the referent.[29] A further complication arises when Saussure insists that a sign must be arbitrary: that is, "for most linguistic signs there is no connection of similitude or of an existential nature between signifier and signified."[30] Yet another example may reduce confusion and relate these difficulties to cinema.

I can invent a word, indeed an entire language, and

endow them with denotative properties. The resulting
language system (assuming I also establish rules) is
strictly arbitrary. The sounds I combine to denote a rock
have no relation to the rock itself. Now, apply the same
notion to cinema, and it is clear that the referent cannot
be dismissed like it can be in a strictly linguistic
analysis.

I can photograph a rock; I can tape record its silence.
I cannot give the rock a new denotative meaning. The
audio-visuals of that rock necessitate an a priori and
material existence of a "rock" that permits reproduction.
In perhaps a better hypothetical, if I speak or write the
word "chair", another individual who hears or sees the
verbal representation (signifier) will respond to my
communication with a mental representation (signified) of a
"chair." I may have in mind a bentwood rocker, while the
respondent thinks a La-Z-Boy recliner. The real-world
chair has no presence in the signification-- in the
production of meaning— or in Saussure's semiotics.

On the other hand, if I show the second person a
film-and-sound track of a chair, the chair alters the
signification. That chair is seen/heard and (presumably)
thought by the respondent. Cinema is motivated, not
arbitrary, but it does signify, or produce meaning. The
upshot of this series of examples is that the structure of
linguistic signs will not be sufficient to pinpoint how

cinematic signs function. Metz realized quite early that no "film language" existed.

Saussure would be unable to account for the signifying practice of cinema without the concept of _langue_. As Rosen indicates:

> "A language, according to Saussure, is an infinite succession of utterances (parole), all of which can theoretically be unique; and a finite system of elements and rules governing the production of the utterances (langue). It is the systemic which explains how understanding can occur. When this idea is combined with the idea that the sign is arbitrary, there is no need for the linguist to concern himself or herself with the referent as part of the linguistic system."[31]

The sign in cinema is not arbitrary, and no langue has been discovered. This leaves cinema outside the semiotic structure of Saussure.

My purpose is showing the weakness of Saussure's system in relation to film semiotics is primarily to provide a context for Metz' disregard of human speech in "talking" cinema. So much attention was paid to the image track of film, that sound was passed off with little critical examination. Metz had to restructure film semiotics, which was "not amenable to Saussurian semiology."[32]

The "project" of cinesemiology, like its definitions, has long since shifted to propositions such as the film as _text_, an emphasis on cinematic codes, and how both function as and in a textual system. Film semiotics has passed

through periods identified as "structuralism",
"post-structuralism", and "critique of the sign", all within
fifteen years! However, Metz, as the pathfinder in cine-
semiology, has not reconsidered his unusual position
concerning sound cinema-- especially concerning speech, a
recognized and primary source of sonic signification. He
is also quick to pigeonhole music and sound effects in a
theoretical limbo.

It is the opinion of this writer that film semiotics
has taken a questionable position on the sound-in-cinema
issue. This position is largely founded upon the theoretical
primacy of the image, and oversights compounded by critical
responses and extensions only of time-worn (and useless)
debates.

Had Christian Metz conferred with director Frank Capra,
he would have learned that "in filmmaking, there are no
rules, only sins; and the Cardinal sin is dullness." The
same could be said of film theory.

CHAPTER TWO

AN UNSOUND FILM SEMIOTICS

In Chapter One, the nature and problems of film
semiotics were outlined. The task of cinesemiology is,
to borrow Peter Wollen's phrase, to identify "signs and
meaning in the cinema."[33] In keeping with the stated
intent of semiotics in general and film semiotics in
particular to function as a science, with attendant
theories, methodologies, and practices, film semiotics must
examine material elements of cinema without privilege or
prejudice. The objective of Chapter Two is to collate
the major writings of film semiologists on the subject of
sound in cinema.

A working definition of the term sound should include
form and function. Metz has broken down the form of sound
into three disparate elements: the spoken words, music,
and sound effects.[34] Daniel Percheron distinguishes four
types of spoken words: dialogue/monologue (e.g. a voice
or voices appearing to come directly from the character(s)
in the image); voice-over on flashback; interior monologue
(also a sort of voice-over); and commentary.[35] A more
complete and complex description can be found in the book
Film Art by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. I will
make use of their description of sound according to

functions in time and space: <u>diegetic</u> and <u>nondiegetic</u>
sound. Simplified, <u>diegetic</u> means "story-related", and
<u>nondiegetic</u> indicates lack of temporal story relationship.
Only the temporal is discussed vis-à-vis <u>nondiegetic</u> for
obvious reasons: a narrator who speaks, as if in the
present, of image-events which supposedly occurred in the
past or future,[36] is not temporally (in time) related, but
still addresses his words to the space of the diegesis:
the screen. Percheron writes of <u>extradiegetic</u> sound, but
his defnintion coincides with that of <u>nondiegetic</u> in most
respects. His explanation of "extra" as "something added
rather than from the outside",[37] however, confuses the
spatial and temporal functions of sound, so this term will
not be used. This synopsis indicates that <u>sound</u> is not a
single, simple aspect of cinema, but is rather multiple and
complex.

As Chapter One noted, the first major work in film
semiotics was done by Christian Metz in the late 1960s.
Metz himself, along with other painstaking film theoreti-
cians and critics, has revised some of his initial premises
and shifted projects in time with his shifts of opinion.
Due to the fact that <u>Film Language</u> set the terms of the
cinesemiotic dialectic, I will begin an articulation of a
general "sound" theory with Metz' remarks in that book.

Metz clearly recognized the trend in film theory to
valorize the "silent" cinema and to disregard the
"talking" cinema. Even use of the term "talking

cinema" is not innocent, as will be seen in the following
chapter. Metz points out that the radical change to sound
did not radically change theories about film for several
years: practice and theory thus eluded each other. The
motivation for this disdain for sound-- especially verbal
speech-- was easily deduced by Metz, who described con-
temptuous theorists as:

> "...almost afraid of verbal language,
> for even as they were defining the
> cinema as a nonverbal language, they
> were still obscurely thinking of some
> pseudo-verbal system within their
> films. Obscurely, yet clearly enough
> for them to see the language of words as
> a powerful rival forever on the point of
> overstepping its bounds."[38]

He also mentions the positive attitudes of Eisenstein,
Pudovkin, and Alexandrov toward the sound-track "in the
absence of speech itself."[39] Despite Metz' critique of
the rejection of critical analysis of the sound track, he
quickly falls into the same habit, which his own subsequent
knowledge does not dispel.

Metz begins to deal with sound as a "thing-in-itself",
a Kantian notion very much opposed to the Althusserian -
Marxist foundations of French semiotics. The notion that a
sound, or a voice, for example, speaks for itself is
reminiscent of that aspect of the sign Saussure saw no need
to consider: the referent, or real-world material. Metz
naively attempts to justify the sound/image dichotomy,

writing:

> "In a deeper sense, nevertheless, any
> utterances, whether governing or
> governed, by nature tells us some-
> thing _first_, whereas an image, or
> noise, or music even when it is
> "telling" us a great deal, must
> first be produced."[40]

Verbal language in film is thus factored out by Metz for
being too much of an _index_, a term Peirce used in his
breakdown of the sign into its parts. It is also too much
an _icon_. Whereas the _index_, for Peirce, is a sign because
it has an existential bond with its object, the _icon_
represents this object by similarity or resemblance.[41]
Neither of these terms fits into Saussure's semiology, and
so they have no counterpart in Metz' film semiotics.

In the case of verbal speech, Metz simply misses the
fact that this menagerie of sounds is _reproduced_, as are
photographic images. Both share indexical and iconic
relationships with their real-world objects of representa-
tion. The preceding quotation seems to grant recorded
speech in cinema a privileged status, but Metz quickly
reverts to his valorization of the image; and the corollary
view of sound as supplement-- an add-on which exists only
to enhance the image:

> "Although..._speech_ has become an
> important element in films
> (occasionally the most important)
> and although its very presence
> introduces units that are really
> small-- since they are the units

> of language-- into the total cine-
> matographic image, only a portion
> of the study of this verbal element
> ...pertains to a specifically filmic
> semiotics...For the investigation of
> the filmic aspects of speech must
> not make us forget that the reason
> speech has become so important in the
> cinema is because, precisely, it is
> speech-- that is to say, because it
> enriches film with the faculties of
> language; to this extent, its study
> ...falls largely outside of the
> theory of the cinema itself."[42]

This passage has significance that is not readily apparent, but it should be stressed that, for the most part, Metz has not strayed from the position of the "place" of the sound track in film theory which can be inferred from the previous series of statements.

One should recall from Chapter One that speech has a definite meaning within Metzian-Saussurian semiotics. Speech (parole) precedes the language system (langue), but it is the latter that enables meaning to be conveyed. By the time Language and Cinema was published, Metz had realized that "no cinematic code or codes dominates cinema to the extent that langue dominates verbal language."[43] Any "code" of sound in cinema, absent the structures Saussure deemed necessary for meaning (langue), is viewed as parole and therefore an unwanted (or unacceptable) system of signification. Yet the necessity for theory to keep pace with practice required that sound in cinema be adequately integrated with film semiotics.

In _Film Language_, Metz tried to stress the primacy
of the image by comparing it to literature— _written_
language, to be exact, as opposed to a language of sounds.
Metz flatly states that vocal speech sounds have "no
intrinsic meaning."[44] Filmic images, however, parallel
novels because both have pre-existent, meaningful material.
Here he comes close to completely contradicting himself.
Supposedly, the pre-existent meaning in film comes from the
referent— real-world object. But I have already showed how
this element receives no attention in Saussure's semiology.
The meaning of words is taken care of through the linguistic
concept of double articulation.

Double articulation may be explained by recycling
Chapter One's example of the rock. The assembly of phonemes
into the code unit "rock" constitutes the first articulation,
the mental representation of the rock (meaning) constitutes
the second articulation. Film lacks the first articulation,
which is tied to the arbitrariness of Saussure's sign.
Metz pulls a fast one by insisting on the film/literature
analogy— literature presumes artistic intention, and Metz
saves the language/cinema project by claiming that the
cinema "is not a language but a language of art."[45] In other
words, it is not a language with a formal system like those
of spoken languages but it is a language _without_ a system.[46]

At this point, I want to demonstrate the conflicting

attitudes toward sound that Metz displays. The earlier
quotation, which described speech as "telling first" and
images as requiring reproduction to "tell" serves a dual
purpose. It admits to the power of phonic signification,
(written words) but it also does not allow the sonic
(spoken) aspect of the phonic to be considered (no intrin-
sic meaning). The reason for this is the desire to avoid
defining cinematic signification at the material level.
Saussure insisted that the overall, not the individual,
systematized set of conventions required for communication
be indifferent to the material of the signs that compose
it.[47] This caveat also serves as a base for the split
between filmic and cinematic aspects of movies that Metz
attempts in the opening pages of Language and Cinema.

Metz re-defines cinesemiotics as an investigation into
the "specifically filmic." The term "filmic" carries a
narrow meaning first articulated in 1946 by Gilbert
Cohen-Séat. In 1946, Cohen-Séat distinguished filmic fact
from cinematic fact. He did so intending to "restrict the
meaning of the term 'film' to a more manageable, specifiable
signifying discourse."[48]

Film is then defined as "an object perceived by the
audience for the duration of its projection."[49] By contrast,
the cinema contains a jumble of elements which intervene
before, during, and after the film. Film semiotics, writes
Metz, is the study of discourses and texts, not the study

of technological, economic, and socio-psychological
dimensions of cinema that inescapably coincide with
film.[50]

The term "object" tips Metz' hand concerning film,
and the notion of "projection" locks him into a primarily
visual semiotics. I will critique the Metzian concept of
"object" more completely in Chapter Three, but feel com-
pelled to mention in passing that this term is inherently
visual in nature. This is a convenient method for
salvaging a visual orientation of cinesemiotics while
suppressing the analysis at the level of material expression.
Sound is simply defined in visual terms. Whereas for Bazin,
the image is the handmaiden of reality, for Metz (and film
semioticians generally) sound is the handmaiden of the
image.

When the 1980 issue of the Yale French Studies
solicited from Christian Metz and his fellow French film
semiologist Daniel Percheron direct engagement with
"Sound/Cinema," the resulting articles further obfuscate
an already dismal study of sound. I will deal first and
foremost with Metz' piece titled "Aural Objects."

Right off the bat, Metz asserts that sound cinema
"today is simply the cinema..."[51] In the body of the text,
he observes the tendency in Western civilization to devote
more study to visual "language", and to the sounds of
spoken language.[52] As long as the spoken sounds are those

of language, Metz continues his evasion of the <u>recording</u> <u>issue</u>. He uses an ingenious theoretical maneuver to bypass the "parole=no sign" problem, and it <u>almost</u> works.

In his footnote to comments on the visual obsession within cultural and aesthetic studies, Metz acts as apologist by suggesting that the privileging of spoken language has detracted from visual richness. Thus his earlier enterprises can be justified as equalizing endeavors. He then proceeds to place "sounds" in competition with spoken language, and once again appears to elevate "sound" to a superior position, over that of the visual <u>and</u> that of spoken language! Christian Metz certainly functions as the great Indian-giver of semiotic status, although he means well.

The insightful (no pun intended) method Metz employs to reconcile aural to visual centers on the <u>aural</u> <u>source</u>. This source is an object; the sound is a characteristic of the source. The <u>most</u> he can, and does, say is that "sounds are more often classified according to the objects which transmit them than by their own characteristics."[53] Metz evidently anticipates the sort of argument I will make in the next chapter, because he tries to attribute the problem of an "aural object" to language which designates objects with nouns. Sounds, in the terminology of physics, are nothing more or less than waves in space. One may perceive them, but one cannot hold them (other than via recording)

as one can a roll of film. The overwhelming influence of ideology in this process of object classification does not escape Metz. His section on this matter is sub-titled "Ideological Undermining of the Aural Dimension."[54]

With his now-familiar aplomb, Metz indulges in that very ideology. The visual and the tactile are primary modes of substantiation— i.e., verifying the world. Tactile, because "touch is traditionally the very criteria of materiality."[55] His truism regarding the visual basically says visuals are primary because they are primary. Aural (sound) substances are therefore labeled "secondary substances" which can only be fully understood in terms of their (hopefully) primary sources. Metz has just attempted to collapse the aural dimension onto that of the visual/tactile. In other words, audio is now visual!

The next section defines "off-screen sound" in cinema, a blatant description of sound in terms of the screen. He incorrectly states that "spatial anchoring of aural events is much more vague and uncertain than that of visual events,"[56] a notion at least partially refuted by Mary Ann Doane. Doane undoes much of Metz' elaborate exposition in her truly excellent article in the same volume of Yale French Studies.[57] Because her remarks are more pertinent as critique, they will be reserved for that purpose.

In a footnote, Metz makes a popular mistake that superficially concedes the superior capability of aural

reproduction. Lenses, the screen, lack of depth, all distort the reproduction of visual object/sources; no corresponding loss of "fidelity" occurs in sound reproduction.[58] This is simply untrue. One certainly does not hear a whispered conversation at a volume which also permits hundreds of others to hear it: this _is_ a distortion.

It is of no help that Metz reveals his objective as a wish to show the perceptual object as a constructed and linguistic unity.[59] Perception, he writes, proceeds by means of objects (which, in his "view," cannot be heard). With a rare reference to the production level of film, Metz says:

> "The situation is clear: the
> language used by technicians and
> studios, without realizing it,
> conceptualizes sound in a way
> that _makes_ _sense_ only for the
> image. We claim that we are
> talking about sound, but we are
> actually thinking of the visual
> image of the sound's source"
> (emphasis added).[60]

Now Metz wishes one to believe that it is the perception (thinking of visual image), rather than the reception/production (talking about soun)which ultimately determines signification. He has veered quite far from strict Saussurian semiotics and nearer to his early phenomenological bias, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and (to some extent) Russian Formalism.[61]

Prior to a short discussion of the Percheron article

that appeared back-to-back with that of Metz, a summary
of the Metzian approach to sound cinesemiotics may be
helpful. First, he instigated film semiotics based on
the semiology outlined by Saussure. Both men brought to
semiotics the structure and goals of linguistics.

Despite the background in the scientific study of
language, the sound track in cinema— which includes speech,
sound effects, and music— is not viewed as an object of
film semiotics. All the comments of Metz regarding
sound-in-film indicate that the sound track exists only by
virtue of the image-track, even though he allows the
occasional dominance of the former. The advent of sound in
cinema— especially the sounds of spoken language— is
described as an "invasion,"[62] one which threatened to pull
down a meticulously constructed argument for cinema as
nonverbal language. Most recently, Metz daringly insists
upon the image called up by sound as the true and proper
aspect of signification. What Metz leaves out of this most
current comment on sound is largely supplied by Daniel
Percheron.

Percheron does not hesitate over the importance of the
spoken word to sound cinema. He cites the French term
cinema parlant (talking cinema) that replaces the Anglo-Amer-
ican sound cinema. The sounds of spoken, not written, language
are thus rescued from the perpetual limbo created for them
in the writings of Christian Metz. Percheron has no problem

with speech (parole) as opposed to langue (language/language
system). Metz accepts dialogue if it is written beforehand;
Percheron accepts only speech:

> "...the spoken word remains the
> major structural element, the
> dominant signifying material,
> the primary component of sound
> in the cinema."[63]

Mary Ann Doane grounds this aural entity more precisely in
discussion of the spoken word, because it includes Metz'
aural object without denying the potency of the sonic
material itself. But Percheron, having acknowledged speech
(and, presumably, language), witholds signifying possibili-
ties for the other two aural dimensions, saying that sound
effects and music "are rarely conveyors of meaning."[64]

Percheron, like Metz, testifies to the primacy of the
image. He examines the form and function of sound in terms
of the screen, without exception. For this theorist, sound
may be classified as "on" or "off"; more accurately,
"on-screen" or "off-screen." Much of the article is engaged
in diagraming the possible combinations, and concerns itself
with arranging aural elements into a "possible taxonomy."[65]

An almost incredible oversight of Metz and Percheron
involves the techniques, the practice of filmmakers and
sound designers. The random but omnipresent use of terms,
such as "on-screen", "sound source", etc. show little
(if any) familiarity with current industry practices. This
theoretical gap is not one between sound and image, nor is

it between filmic and cinematic: it is between production
and perception. The semiotic analyses scrutinized in this
chapter reveal Metz and Percheron as materially naive
critics/theorists. That neither claims to be a film
historian is telling by what is absent— ironically, that
is a phenomenon which would be appreciated by Saussure,
who conceived of language as a system of differences. The
difference between an unsound semiotics and a coherent
theoretical position on sound cinema occurs at the material
level, and in history.

A position statement of film semiologists on sound as
signifying practice may be found in Shakespeare's
A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act V, Scene 1:

"I see a voice."

In Chapter Three, I will critique this position from the
standpoints of materiality and history.

CHAPTER THREE

INSIGHTS ON SOUND IN FILM SEMIOTICS

The position advanced by cinesemiologists regarding
the sound track in cinema is unsatisfactory. Purporting to
be rigorous and scientific, the writings examined in
Chapter Two demonstrate instead rigidity and ideological
bias. For the most part, film semiology joins other more
traditional theories of film in its adherence to a visual
orientation. Although any "new" critical methodology must
address those areas of importance in its field of application,
its very newness expresses an inherent weakness in the older
(or other) method. Film semiotics thus has two strikes
against it: first, it has not offered a valid critique of
the "old" theories;[66] second, it perpetuates a sensory-per-
ceptual hierarchy that cannot be defended. Perhaps the most
scathing criticism that can be made is that these film
theorists seem unfamiliar with the actual practice of sound
cinema! Ideally, research and development lag behind theory.
In the case of cinesemiotics, the reverse seems to be true.

In Chapters One and Two, much space was devoted to
definitions and terminology. The visual nature of most film
terms was pointed out, and its impact can be briefly stated:

> "The source of the image's current
> dominance is closely linked to

the vocabulary developed by
three-quarters of a century of
film critics...With each new
visually oriented analysis,
with each new image-inspired
theory, film study's exclusive
image orientation gains ground."[67]

These remarks made by Rick Altman pay special attention to
what he calls the "strongly visual emphasis of recent French
film theory,"[68] which definitely includes Metzian cine-
semiotics.

In the conclusion of Chapter Two, two lines of argument
were mentioned as this chapter's response to "unsound" film
semiotics: an historical and a material argument. These are
largely based on the twin fallacies extant in film theory
that film scholar Altman hoped to expose (and to combat),
but I have taken them in slightly different directions.
Altman identifies these as the historical and ontological
fallacies.

Because an ontological argument is one which is a priori
and focused on the nature of the existence of, in this case,
cinema, I wish to avoid some of the metaphysical connotations
of the term. Bazin used the ontology of the photographic
image to analyze the "nature" of cinema. He actually
imposed this "nature", which, of course, rendered it
unnatural. The image became, primarily, the "what" in the
question "What is cinema?"[69] "What" adds to the visual/object
bias, and while the term material may suffer from that same
slant, it seems less obscure and less ideology-laden than

ontology. Since the material argument requires a more explicit and complex critique, I shall begin with the historical argument against the semiotic position.

Perhaps the most interesting place to begin is in contemporary film "history." Recalling that Metz himself accepts the marriage of sight and sound, not only in film, but also in television, one can no longer legitimately insist that sound is a mere supplement with occasional moments of supremacy. Even the term "silent" film has long testified to the reign of its counterpart, the sound film Today, silent cinema is the historical artifact, an anachronism of great artistic merit, but the exception rather than the rule. Mel Brooks' parody Silent Movie (1976) illustrates the distance, regardless of years, in audience expectations concerning films. By 1978, nearly fifty years after The Jazz Singer (1929) appeared on the scene, Charles Schreger was heralding the "Second Coming of Sound" and describing its importance for consumers:

> "When this audience goes to the
> theater, they want to hear the
> movie as well as see it - and
> hear it as well as they would
> at home or at a live concert."[70]

And not only the audience concentrates on the sound within the cinema. A partial list of directors who exercise great care in the aural part of their craft contains "some of the industry's most successful, esteemed, and adventurous talents."[71] Schreger names thirteen, and I will add two

more: Robert Altman, Michael Cimino, Francis Coppola, Milos Forman, Philip Kaufman, Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas, Terry Malick, Alan J. Pakula, Ken Russell, Martin Scorcese, Jerzy Skolimowski, Steven Spielberg, Jacques Tati, and— especially— Jean-Luc Godard. This list clearly omits many foreign directors whose films are not as accessible to American audiences, but it does suggest that sound is not neglected in film <u>practice</u>. As the practice becomes more widespread, the terminology of film expands to include new technologies like Dolby stereo, and to foster a vocabulary which is less camera-oriented.

The improved technical capabilities for sound recording and reproduction have been linked with improved audience reactions— in terms of dollars:

> "...informal surveys by Twentieth-Century Fox indicate that Dolby-equipped theaters significantly outgrossed non-Dolby theaters playing the film. Indeed, in most of the year's hit movies - <u>Star Wars</u>, <u>Smokey and the Bandit</u> (CB's), <u>Saturday Night Fever</u> (discos), <u>Close Encounters</u>, <u>Grease</u> -- sound has played a crucial role..."[72]

This is not to say that all, or even most, filmmakers consider the sound track before or during shooting. Some place it on a mental back burner until the film has been shot. What varies is not the importance of sound, but the technique and function.

French director Jacques Tati provides an example of the back-burner technique. He shoots the film silent and

post-synchronizes it, but he also thinks of the synchronization as re-shooting the film in another dimension:

> "At this stage it is a silent film
> that I have at my disposal. It
> remains for me to 're-shoot' each
> scene, no longer for the images
> but for the sound. I give it
> great care. As a matter of fact,
> I consider sound as of capital
> importance."[73]

Even more extreme (and rare) is the director who suborns the image to the sound track.

Writer Jonathan Rosenbaum related a story in Film Comment which had been told him by a friend who had observed Elaine May's editing of her movie Mikey and Nicky. Her criterion for selecting takes was the quality of sound recording.[74] Robert Altman (Nashville, Three Women, A Wedding) is another experimenter, as is Jean-Luc Godard, who does not believe that the images "speak for themselves."[75] Altman, for instance, equipped actors with tiny radio mikes, rather than using overhead boom mikes. On an eight-track system, (which Altman was using in 1978) seven actors may speak at once, forcing the viewer to select the material to which he or she attends.[76] Godard employs omni-directional microphones, which pick up all the sounds on location. Again, the audience must filter out honking car horns, insects buzzing— in other words, the audience mixes the sound themselves, privileging some information and disregarding others. This experimentation still has its detractors. Rosenbaum

assesses the situation, writing:

> "If May had sacrificed sound
> quality for the sake of con-
> ventional editing, one doubts
> that anyone would have objected,
> or even noticed. As Altman's
> apparent retreat from aural
> explorations also implies, sound
> thinking...isn't likely to win
> any industry prizes" (emphasis
> added).77

One possible reason why no one would notice a sacrifice of
sound quality is that this is the convention: it is what
people are accustomed to and, therefore, what they expect.
Another reason has to do with the more primal and less
intellectual response of most individuals to "sounds." This
will be reserved for further discussion in the material
argument.

Contemporary film, then, has taken up the technology of
sound recording. As a separate industry, its grosses fre-
quently surpass those of the movie theater box office.[78] This
alone casts doubt upon Percheron's statement that music and
sound effects have little meaning to convey in a film. The
preceding discussion, with its list of movies like Star Wars,
Close Encounters, and Saturday Night Fever, shows that the
spoken word, music, and aural effects may not only support,
but surpass the image as conveyors of meaning. The popularity
of those sound tracks as LPs (sans image track) effectively
refutes such a simplification.

Undoubtedly, Percheron would advance the argument that

sound tracks from films are meaningful because they evoke

the image track,[79] and enhance the potential for its recall

via memory. Granted, the music and special sound effects

are usually added to the film after the editing of the image

track. But this does not in and of itself indicate the

use-value of sound. The sound track need not be obtrusive

to be effective, especially the effects which Percheron so

archly disdains. Rosenbaum observes:

> "...sound is praised when it's aimed
> directly at the gut, bypassing the
> brain while contriving to persuade
> one that the images are "more" than
> they actually are: scarier, funnier,
> bolder, sadder, wiser, truer -
> literally, more meaningful."[80]

So much for Percheron on music and sound effects. Rosenbaum

uses language rather loosely. Reception-perception certainly

does not "bypass" the brain, but this sloppy sarcasm does

not invalidate his estimate of the power of sound in con-

junction with the image. The dismissal of an ancient and

still-thriving art (music) and a profitable cinematic prac-

tice (sound effects) contributes to the theoretical tradition,

which operates as a "communal agreement to privilege one

aspect of a film text by masking another, identifying the

part as a whole."[81]

When Rick Altman takes issue with the "historical

fallacy," he addresses himself to the history of film

theory:

> "Historically, sound was added to

> the image; ergo in the analysis of
> sound cinema we treat sound as an
> after-thought, a supplement which
> the image is free to take or leave
> as it chooses."[82]

This refers to the fact that the technologies of film and
sound were not originally joined in the production of a
product (movie) which juxtaposed two separate recording
processes. However, one can read this into Percheron as
well, with his conviction that sound, as "added" to the
edited film, becomes a merely "additional" means of signi-
fication. A more famous semiotician, Gianfranco Bettetini,
is even more direct:

> "'The essence of the cinema, is
> basically visual, and every sonic
> intervention ought to limit itself
> to a justified and necessary act of
> expressive integration!'"[83]

Bettetini's statement is both descriptive and normative.
It makes aesthetic prescriptions for the sound track, and
this prescription is one of limitation. It is also the bulk
of the ontological fallacy.

In brief, the "ontological fallacy" claims that film is
a visual medium and that images must be/are the primary
carriers of the film's meaning and structure."[84] There is
no question that the image and the sound tracks are produced
independently, and received/perceived by different sensory
apparatus. But it is no longer possible to define and or
valorize one material (image) over another (sound) at the

level of recording. Any beginning film student is aware of the combined recording capability of the sound camera. Both image and sound may be recorded simultaneously, or the image may be recorded and the sound added later. In any case, the camera-projector apparatus now contains the audio apparatus. The film itself is equipped with a magnetic "stripe". All this is just to show that "sound" cannot necessarily be separated from the image at the level of apparatus. The sound-on-film phenomenon eliminates simplistic rank orderings of material elements of cinema.

Why, then, do the cinesemiologists obstinately continue the image-sound hierarchy? As Chapter Two noted, Metz wishes to find in the "perceptual object" a unity. Mary Ann Doane explains the problems sound cinema poses for those who seek to unify a distinctly disunified perceptual object:

> "Sound carries with it the potential
> risk of exposing the material heter-
> ogeneity of the medium; attempts to
> contain that risk surface in the
> language of the ideology of organic
> unity."85

By aiming at a theoretical unity, or oneness, Metz by definition requires a cognitive coup d' état to change a part into a whole...a whole already thoroughly postulated to the satisfaction of scholars.

Two threads of theory run throughout Metzian film semiotics and create chaos in his actual position. Putting it bluntly, Metz just can't make up his mind. The first

thread rests upon the possibility of sound-in-itself, a purely sonic (not phonic) and pre-verbal entity which has no intrinsic meaning. Only through a link with language (langue) or the source of the sound will Metz admit the sound track to a non-subordinate position. The whole notion of a "aural object" is difficult to analyze, but it is ultimately the Trojan horse of film semiotics.

In "Aural Objects", Metz finally uses the actual phrase "sound in itself", in the following context:

> "We tend to forget that a sound
> in itself is never 'off': either
> it is audible or it doesn't exist."[86]

The sheer wrongness of this can and must be demonstrated. If a sound is not audible, it can only be said with certainty that it is <u>not</u> <u>audible</u>. Animals can perceive registers beyond that of the human ear, for example. Ironically Metz remains silent about silence, which is a positive sort of negation of sound. As Bordwell and Thompson note, silence can be an eloquent source of meaning in cinema.[87] The Metzian sound-in-itself may have its roots in Baudry, who believed that sound "'is differentiated from its material conditions of production.'"[88] One convenient way to anchor this free-floating material is to attach it to the succession of images in film.

The idea of an aural object as proposed by Metz is largely absurd. When one is startled by a car backfiring,

one is not jumping at the image of the source of the sound;
that is, one does not jump at the mental picture of an
exhaust pipe. To use another example, one does not "think"
of the vibrating vocal chords which are the source of the
human voice. A far more fascinating task would be to trace
the source (aural object) of human speech (parole):
eventually, one would be discussing electrical impulses
among synapses in the cerebral cortex. Maybe a better way
to dispose of Metz' aural object is to refuse it the unity
of the "source" concept.

Sound designer Walter Murch, in an interview about his
work on films, mentions that at one point in Coppola's
Apocalypse Now (1979), 160 different sound tracks were used.
He describes some of the tricks used to obtain verisimil-
tude:

> "There are other times when you can,
> deftly, put little things in there
> that don't seem like you put them
> there but which, nevertheless, add
> up: somebody closes the refrigera-
> tor door and there is a little tinkle
> of glass from inside— that means the
> refrigerator is full. The function
> of sound at this level is very close
> to art direction" (emphasis added).[89]

It is amusing to imagine how Metz could determine the aural
object at any given moment in a multitrack film.

Another intriguing project would be to explain how
Metz accounts for the 50% total blackness the audience
"perceives" while viewing a film?[90] This blackness (absence

of image) does not have the potential for meaning that silence (absence of sound) has in the "object perceived by the audience for the duration of its projection."[91] Probably, the use of the term "perceived" would become a basis for quibbling, but Murch's interview anticipates it. Sound editing, or mixing, can emphasize one track over another, with the intent of calling attention to itself, and it is difficult to conceive of a soundtrack which deliberately sublimates aural messages. In the realm of spiraling film economics, aiming at unconscious "perception" would be somewhat foolhardy. My point is that the numerous sound-tracks which comprise the "sound track" have no visual counter-part. Even a super-imposition does not compare with the exponential meaning capability of 160 tracks! While one might suggest that the "picture is worth a thousand sounds", that picture is unlikely to hold such value for two hours. A second response might cite the objects within the frame (or on the screen), and certainly hundreds could be counted. This does not deny the signifying function of multitrack, cinematic sound: it merely equalizes the numbers involved.

Percheron adds his two cents to Metz' aural object by splitting the "on/off" of sound and doing it in terms of the screen. This, combined with Metz, would be a very clever way of pushing the source of sound as the final arbiter of perception. Yet, taking the notion of source to be the "objects which transmit them",[92] one arrives, not at the screen, but at the speaker behind the screen. In the case of

Dolby, there are sure to be other speakers not located directly behind the screen. The above critiques still apply.

At least, the aural object represents a logical extension of the few ventures into sound semiotics that appear in Film Language and Language and Cinema. It is not unlikely that Metz eschewed the spoken word in sound cinema as theoretical object. Its appearance, generally within a language, must have seemed properly the province of linguistics. However, the essential mediation of the recording apparatus is ignored. The reluctance of Metz to confront verbal language in cinema is not shared by his fellow cinesemiologists.

Metz was on the right track (no pun intended) when he identified the pre-intellectual forcefulness of speech. What he failed to notice was this speech as that of the human voice. I do not intend to repeat the thing-in-itself error of Metz by intimating that the fact of the voice alone is meaningful. I do intend to suggest that the more primal acceptance of sound-voice-music grants it a non-cognitive signifying power. And if the historical argument is allowed to include individual perceptual "history", the aural— specifically the human voice— turns the primacy of the visual completely around.

Mary Ann Doane's article in the Sound/Cinema issue of the 1980 Yale French Studies has a title which "says" it all: "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of

Body and Space."[93] Doane writes about the near-total

supremacy of sound in a child's perceptual growth and

development. Suddenly, the visual-tactile, so casually

presented by Metz as _the_ sensory pecking order, is

temporarily (and temporally) displaced by an aural-tactile

hierarchy. Although any observant parent would know the

historical primacy of the audible, Mary Ann Doane provides

a neat wrap-up:

> "Space, for the child, is defined
> initially in terms of the audible,
> not the visible: 'It is only in
> a second phase that the organ-
> ization of visual space insures the
> perception of the object as ex-
> ternal'...Furthermore, the voice
> has a greater command over space
> than a look-one can hear around
> corners, through walls. Thus,
> for the child, the voice, _even_
> _before_ _language_ is the instrument
> of demand."[94]

The voice, not the visuals (which are, of course, of

inestimable value), enables speech to evolve into language.

That visual proficiency and priority may overtake the aural

is not equivalent to replacing it as a more primitive carrier

of meaning. The unwritten assumption in semiotics is that

the assembly of sounds, or oral communication, into languages

has enormous signifying capability. But the "aural" in the

oral has been disenfranchized in the cinesemiotic project.

The turn-around historical argument simply attempts a

reductio ad absurdum of the ontological fallacy. In technology

of cinema, silent film came first. In human perceptual

development, sound and touch come first. Neither offers a valid measurement of the material primacy of sound in cinema.

Thus, the visual-aural hierarchy cannot be proved to exist at either the level of reproduction (apparatus) or reception (brain). If this hierarchy does seem supported by common sense (whatever that is), it is not properly evaluative, nor is it any sort of aesthetic index. Metzian cinesemiotics appears to view the aural as an impoverished vehicle of signification, and this poverty originates in the primitive status of sound in comparison with the cognitive demands of visual perception. Such a view is misguided, and ignores the complementary relationship of the primal and the intellectual. Frederic Jameson, discussing T. W. Adorno's ideas on Western music, writes:

> "What is particularly noteworthy
> is the poverty of the materials
> from which such new perception
> has been fashioned: for the ear
> is the most archaic of the senses,
> and instrumental sounds are far
> more abstract and inexpressive
> than words or visual symbols. Yet
> in one of those paradoxical re-
> versals that characterize the
> dialectical process, it is pre-
> cisely this primitive, regressive
> starting point that determines the
> development of the most complex of
> the arts."95

The power of the primitive in such diverse forms as myth, music, and Freudian psychoanalysis, to name just a few, has been a subject of countless volumes. It seems safe to say

that the more primal material of sound may enhance its
potential for meaning.

Recalling the aural-tactile world of the infant, another
unique characteristic of sound is its ability to bridge this
sensory gap. High decibel recordings, combined with ad-
vanced playback sound systems (such as Dolby-equipped movie
houses) can actually shake the seats, therefore becoming
tactile as well as audible. This was a feature of the film
Earthquake, and other movies employ the stereo system to
to "move" the sound of, for instance, an airplane from one
speaker to another as the plane flies in the same "direction"
within the frame.[96] When the early Metz downplayed the
spatial contribution of sound in cinema, he was mistaken.

Percheron is not so hasty. He places the sound track in
an (unintentionally?) equal position with motion, saying:

> "...(the general rule is that sound
> is an element which reinforces the
> impression of reality, completes it;
> it is the only given, along with
> movement, that is reproduced integ-
> rally in the cinema and moreover, it
> helps to three-dimensionalize the
> rectangular screen)."[97]

This allusion to movement as a given comes from Metz, as does
the "impression of reality", and may be clarified by re-
turning to the infant-development analysis. Humans respond
instinctively to certain sounds (loud and/or unexpected),
to sudden motion (birds exiting their cover), and to the
"fear of falling" more specifically known as the Moro

reflex. Perhaps the whole visual orientation of film theory should be re-directed to center on motion, which does not reside in the image. If sounds à la Metz have no intrinsic meaning, the solitary image also has none. Besides, the still photograph— which does have intrinsic meaning— is not that which Metz describes and seeks as the exclusively cinematic or the exclusively filmic, unless the entire projection is comprised of a single image.

In any case, Percheron has granted a reprieve from the image ideology only paralleled when Metz, in an elaborate footnote, deigned to recognize the dialogue in sound/cinema as an element on par with the image. His concern was with elements containing meaning before the signification, and dialogue qualified more as a written source of signification than an oral, aural, or linguistic one. Why Metz and Percheron relegate their more coherent comments to footnotes and parentheses remains a mystery.

The second elusive thread woven into the fabric of the filmic fact has already been touched upon. The role of verbal language in sound cinema is still considered grist for the linguistic mill. A desire not to allow the material of language to detract from the material of the image is tied to a persistent attempt to assign this very material— the structures of language— to the visual, nonverbal material of successive photographs. The rationale for this seems to be that if exposure to human speech yields verbal

language, exposure to visual objects will result in a nonverbal language. Regardless of the fact that the material world is not amenable to a visual grammar— is not, as Saussure would say, arbitrary— post-structuralists, semiologists, neo-Formalists and other film-related theor- eticians appear hell-bent to ignore the richness that language and sound have brought to the image. In the words of Rick Altman:

> "No matter that the practice of
> fifty years of film making has
> clearly established the dominant
> position of dialogue, along with
> the initial position of the
> screenwriter, no matter that the
> most characteristic practice of
> classical film narrative should
> be the normally redundant technique
> of pointing the camera at the speaker,
> no matter that critics commonly quote
> a film word-for-word but rarely illus-
> trate their comments with frame en-
> largements..."[98]

Metz sets up a false dichotomy between oral (aural) and written (visual) language in order to plumb the (imaginary) depths of the photographic images in cinema.

Privileging visual over aural signifying practices within film semiotics contradicts the stated goals of the field. Artificial perceptual hierarchies are proposed but not defended in the futile attempt to force a generic "meaning" upon aesthetic objects and processes. Worst of all, semiologists seem unaware of the manner in which sound does function in cinema.

It is the opinion of this writer that semiology obscures more than it observes, and that it is of scant value to those who, indeed, <u>practice</u> signification: filmmakers, directors, sound designers, art directors, etc. In an editorial epilogue to Raymond Durgnat's article on the death of cinesemiology, an amusing anecdote summarized the artist's view of semiotic theories of his art:

> "Joseph Losey, who had left the conference after hearing the presentation by Raymond Bellour, Jacqueline Rose and Constance Penley, returned to offer his comment that all the critical theory he'd had to listen to that afternoon was 'a pack of shit.'"99

Hear, hear...

ENDNOTES

[1] Raymond Durgnat, "The Death of Cinesemiology (With Not Even a Whimper)," Cineaste 10 (Spring 1980): 10.

[2] Robert Stam, et. al., "Sign and Countersign: Raymond Durgnat Responds to His Critics," Cineaste 10 (Fall 1980): 13-17.

[3] See, for example, Rick Altman's "Introduction," Yale French Studies 60, No. 1 (1980): 3-15.

[4] Perhaps the most imposing and complete work on this subject is Philip Rosen's doctoral dissertation, especially Vol. II, Chapters III and IV. Philip Rosen, "The Concept of Ideology and Contemporary Film Criticism: A Study of the Marxist Theoretical Tradition," (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1978), pp. 221-502.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., p. 149.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., pp. 35-36.

[9] Stephen Heath, "Introduction: Questions of Emphasis," Screen 14 (Spring-Summer 1973): 9.

[10] Julia Kristeva, "The Semiotic Activity," Screen 14 (Spring-Summer 1973): 27.

[11] Heath, "Introduction," p. 9.

[12] Rosen, "Concept of Ideology," p. 151.

[13] Louis Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982), p. 428.

[14]Louis Althusser, "Freud and Lacan" in <u>Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays</u>, (London, 1971), p. 184, quoted in Paul Willemen, "Editorial," <u>Screen</u> 14 (Spring-Summer 1973): 3.

[15]Tzvetan Todorov, "Semiotics," <u>Screen</u> 14 (Spring-Summer 1973): 15.

[16]J. Dudley Andrew, <u>The Major Film Theories</u>, (New York: Oxford, 1976), p. 216.

[17]Ibid., p. 214.

[18]Editorial response to Jim Hillier's "Letter to the Editor," <u>Cineaste</u> 11 (Fall 1982): 4.

[19]Heath, "Introduction," p. 9.

[20]Christian Metz, <u>Film Language</u>, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford, 1974): p. 92.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Roland Barthes, <u>Elements of Semiology</u>, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Boston: Beacon, 1970), p. 9.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Christian Metz, "<u>Language and Cinema</u>, trans. Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1974), p. 16.

[26]See, for example, Tzvetan Todorov, "Semiotics," <u>Screen</u> 14 (Spring-Summer 1973): 15-23; also the fine table of semiotic terms in: Roland Barthes, <u>Elements of Semiology</u>, p. 37.

[27]Barthes, <u>Elements of Semiology</u>, p. 38.

[28]Rosen, "Concept of Ideology," p. 356.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid., p. 357.

[32]Ibid., p. 379.

[33]If anything, Wollen's title shows the form and function of semiotics quite nicely. Peter Wollen, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1972), pp. 116-174.

[34]Metz, Language and Cinema, p. 16.

[35]Daniel Percheron, "Sound in Cinema and its Relationship to Image and Diegesis," trans. Marcia Butzel, Yale French Studies 60, No. 1 (1980): 20.

[36]David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Film Art: An Introduction, (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1980), pp. 204-7.

[37]Percheron, "Sound in Cinema", p. 18.

[38]Metz, Film Language, pp. 50-51.

[39]Ibid., p. 53.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Wollen, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema, p. 122.

[42]Metz, Film Language, p. 138.

[43]Rosen, "Concept of Ideology," p. 382.

[44]Metz, Film Language, p. 212.

[45]Ibid., p. 64.

[46]Ibid., p. 65.

[47]Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, p. 13.

[48]Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 12.

[49]Ibid., p. 13.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Christian Metz, "Aural Objects," *Yale French Studies* 60, No. 1 (1980): 24.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid., p. 27.

[54]Ibid., p. 25.

[55]Ibid., p. 28.

[56]Ibid., p. 29.

[57]Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies* 60, No. 1 (1980): 33-50

[58]Metz, "Aural Objects," p. 29.

[59]Ibid., p. 31.

[60]Ibid., p. 29.

[61]Rosen, "Concept of Ideology," pp. 379-403.

[62]Metz, *Language and Cinema*, p. 279.

[63]Percheron, "Sound in Cinema," p. 22.

[64]Ibid., p. 23

[65]Ibid., p. 16.

[66]Brian Henderson, <u>A Critique of Film Theory</u>, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 110.

[67]Rick Altman, "Introduction," <u>Yale French Studies</u> 60, No. 1 (1980): 3.

[68]Ibid., p. 4.

[69]See especially André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in <u>What Is Cinema?</u> Vol. 1 trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), pp. 9-16.

[70]Charles Schreger, "The Second Coming of Sound," <u>Film Comment</u> 14 (Sept.-Oct. 1978): 34.

[71]Ibid., p. 35

[72]Ibid., p. 36

[73]Lucy Fischer, "Beyond Freedom and Dignity: An Analysis of Jacques Tati's <u>Playtime</u>," <u>Sight and Sound</u> 45 (Autumn 1976): 236-7.

[74]Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Sound Thinking," <u>Film Comment</u> 14 (Sept.-Oct. 1978): 40.

[75]Henderson, <u>Critique of Film Theory</u>, p. 71.

[76]Schreger, "Second Coming of Sound," p. 35.

[77]Rosenbaum, "Sound Thinking," p. 40.

[78]Schreger, "Second Coming of Sound," p. 34.

[79]Noël Burch, <u>Theory of Film Practice</u>, trans. Helen R. Lane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 90.

[80]Rosenbaum, "Sound Thinking," p. 38.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Altman, "Introduction," p. 14.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema," p. 35.

[86] Metz, "Aural Objects," p. 29.

[87] Bordwell and Thompson, Film Art, p. 191.

[88] Alan Williams, "Is Sound Recording Like A Language?" Yale French Studies 60, No. 1 (1980): 52.

[89] Frank Paine, "Sound Design: An Interview with Walter Murch," Journal of the University Film Association 33 (Fall 1981): 16.

[90] Ibid., p. 19.

[91] Metz, Language and Cinema, p. 13.

[92] Metz, "Aural Objects," p. 27.

[93] Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema," p. 33.

[94] Ibid., p. 44.

[95] Frederic Jameson, Marxism and Form, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 13

[96] Schreger, "Second Coming of Sound," p. 36.

[97] Percheron, "Sound in Cinema," pp. 17-18.

[98] Altman, "Introduction," p. 15.

[99] Durgnat, "Death of Cinesemiology," p. 13.

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     of Film." Translated by Diana Matias. Screen 14
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