

# Towards a Cognitive Semiotic Approach to Cinema: Semiotics vs. ‘Semiology’

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## Abstract

The point of departure for an eventual presentation is the question if a cognition (in semiotics) always has to be formulated in the terms of a triadic sign, as is it done sometimes when applying a Peircian perspective on film (Ehrt 2005: 72). The problem of the importance of a “Third” is at stake when discussing how film produces meaning. To understand film is also to understand the concept of cinema, to paraphrase the famous example postulated by Peirce about giving and gift. But is it correct in this conjunction to criticise ‘semiology’ represented, for instance, by Greimas’ ‘transfer d’objet’ (Ehrt 2005: 121-22) of a degeneration into a dyadic approach not only to gifts but also more generally to narration (i.e., time) in film? Now, to refer to the opening line: if, according to Peirce, a cognition always is ‘a cognition of the Real’ (Ehrt 2005: 140) couldn’t a concept of the Real also be said to be comprised in Metz’s (another example of an early ‘semiolog’) postulation that ‘movement’ (here interpreted in terms of Peirce’s Pragmaticist concept of action) in film images convey life, i.e., the Real (Metz 2003 [1968]: 17)? This being so, one could add, because film is intrinsically iconic. Thus, may we dispense with linguistics when analysing narration in film? Well, linguistics is ‘not necessary to the analysis of filmic narration’ (Buckland 2000:5). As Sonesson (2009: 63) writes (about pictures) in ‘this respect [...] pictures are actually better than verbal language at suggesting a story line’. The sequentiality of film — of course — enforces this inherent potential of

## TOWARDS A COGNITIVE FILM SEMIOTIC

Warren Buckland in his book *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* from 2000, puts an intriguing question, namely what is cognitive in Metz (Buckland 2000). In fact, that question could be reformulated in more general terms as well, namely what is cognitive in semiotics. However, such a question is beyond the scope of this presentation. Christian Metz, one might perhaps say without exaggeration, is the father of film semiotics although the Russian formalists and Eisenstein (being inspired by Saussure), lay a foundation in the 1920s to what was later to be called (film/cultural) semiotics.

Now, Buckland's book has been a true source of inspiration for the presentation at hand, but due to lack of space I'll focus only on some overarching aspects of its importance, namely the ones underlining the fact that Metz's film semiotics still has something to tell us, although its structuralist approach might seem *passé*. And above all, perhaps, Buckland's book demonstrates the importance of continuing to analyse the cognitive dimensions in Metz's work, to the benefit for further developments of a cognitive theory of film semiotics. Therefore the initial question rhetorically opposing semiotics to 'semiology' doesn't seem all too productive, if we may agree that film is intrinsically an iconic medium. That is, in our analyses we may not dispense with the film's 'analogical' relation to the objects depicted. This is often essential when it comes to studying what is usually called European art film, a genre that may be represented by the Hungarian director Béla Tarr and his short film 'Prologue' (2004)<sup>[1]</sup>. The film has no dialogue, and uses only moving images to convey the story. How may we understand such a film? The question will be addressed again later on.

Buckland starts off by re-reading Metz's *Grande Syntagmatique* in the light of Chomsky's theories of mind and Chomskyian film theory. *Grande Syntagmatique* may be described as a definition of sequences/syntagmas making up a film (the overarching system), and as such they are viewed as being analogous to sentences in language. However, at stake here is the problem of meaning. Transformative Generative Grammar (TGG) doesn't explain meaning, mainly being occupied with the issue of comprehensibility in contrast to the semiotic approach dealing with principles of relevance and meaning. At stake also, in this conjunction, is the problem of mediation—an issue at the very centre of semiotics. In the early Metz one might find phenomenological and peircean approaches to the study of film which point to other possibilities, than those inspired by chomskyan assumptions, to connect his film semiotics to theories of cognition.

The notion of a human intrinsic linguistic competence as something *a priori* doesn't explain the complex evolution of human cognition, of human competence to understand and invent complex sign systems as for instance cinema, as the Canadian psychologist Merlin Donald has shown in his work (Donald 1991). Donald puts forth that the early hominid mimetic culture, social to its nature, that began to evolve about 4 million years ago gave birth to a specific human skill: invention. He writes: '[M]imesis is fundamentally different from imitation and mimicry in that it involves the invention of internal representations. When there is an audience to interpret the action, mimesis also serves the purpose of social communication' (Donald

[1] 'Prologue' in *Visions of Europe*, 2004.

1991: 169). Mimetic culture (4M–0,4Mya) gave rise to the mythic culture (0,5 Mya–present) and the second transition in the human cognitive /cultural development characterised by the entrance of language. These two stages eventually led to the theoretic culture and the modern man (recent sapiens cultures), defined by analytic thinking and immense possibilities of external memory storage.

Donald's theory of the evolution of human cognition and culture is fruitful indeed for further developments of a cognitive semiotic theory about moving images and cinema, specifically in the light of cultural semiotics inspired by phenomenology.

### **AN INTERSUBJECTIVE APPROACH TO THE COGNITION OF THE REAL: AN ALTERNATIVE COGNITIVE FILM SEMIOTICS**

Thus, the term intersubjective is used here as a contrasting theory to the chomskyan paradigm rooted in his theories about language acquisition (or more broadly speaking about narrative competence). The psychologist Daniel D. Hutto states that our everyday understanding of actions (what he calls Folk Psychology, FP) is «best characterized as a kind of narrative practice» and to fully 'digest' FP we «depend upon having a special training with narratives» (Hutto 2009: 9). And to narrate, according to Donald, was a skill that humans gained as a result of the mimetic skills obtained later in the evolution during what he calls the mythic culture. In other terms, FP (or narratives) is intersubjective, a socio-cultural practice. In short, the complexity of film — as a specific medium — might be said to consist of its intricate use of both mimesis (non-verbal) and language (dialog and/or narrator). Therefore film also reflects our everyday usage of narration (generally speaking) in order to understand life. Furthermore, film as a medium is a result of modern technique. Thereby film bears traces of, in a very special way, many layers of human cognitive and cultural evolution. Now, back to Metz and the question about iconicity in moving images, involving both mimetic (analogical/iconic) and mythic (narrative) elements.

Metz starts out in the first volume of *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* with a phenomenological approach to the study of film and the notions of indexicality and iconicity are implicit in for instance the opening essay «L'impression de réalité», where he states that the movement of — or perhaps in — film resembles or indicates movements in the real life (Metz 2003). Behind this, one may feel some influences of the American philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, a reference that becomes overt further on in the *Essais* in section II ('Problèmes de sémiologie du cinéma') and the essay 'Le cinéma: langue ou langage?', and in a lecture distributed and translated into English as 'On the Notion of Cinematographic Language' given in Paris at the Oberlin Student Film conference 1972 (Metz 1976). In these examples Metz maintains the view that film is above all an iconic medium, something that he reformulates in another term saying that cinema is *analogous* to its referents in the «real» world. This is a view that he reevaluates in «Problèmes de dénominations dans le film de fiction» further on in the collection, under influence of Eco's theory about the cinematic/pictorial sign being arbitrary and thereby codified. As a result Metz defines a number of what he calls «extra-cinematic codes» which enter the film under the cover of analogy:

1) *iconologie*: the film in itself as an artefact produced in a specific socio-cultural context (norms for representation) 2) *identification*: the film as an oeuvre (collective conception of what is an image) and; 3) *perception in itself*: visual habits of constructions of form and figures (naturally deciphered by the audience of the socio-cultural sphere). Metz writes:

Contrairement à ce que nous pensions il y quatre ans [notamment dans “Le cinéma: langue ou langage?”], il ne nous paraît nullement impossible, aujourd’hui, de supposer que *l’analogie est elle-même codée sans cesser néanmoins de fonctionner authentiquement comme analogie par rapport aux codes de niveau supérieur*, lesquels ne commencent pas à entrer en jeu que sur la base de ce premier acquis. (Metz 2003 [1968] : 114)<sup>[2]</sup>

As Metz elaborated a broader definition of codes and their functions and the ‘entire cinematic analogon’ becomes ‘at its core, a network of interacting codes’ (Kickasola 2009: 462). This fact, is underlined by Joseph G. Kickasola (2009) in his historical overview of Metz’s film semiotics and how it developed in *Film Language* (1974) [orig. *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* 1968], including for instance the essay ‘Problems of denotation in the fiction film’ discussed here, and *Language and Cinema* (1974) [orig. *Langue et cinéma* 1971]—a book where Metz maintains the idea about codes and cinema throughout.

Now, as Sonesson has argued, Eco’s justification of the conventional (coded) nature of pictures (iconic signs) is merely pointing to the fact that the culture in which the picture is made has norms for the production of pictures. Sonesson’s point is that the picture’s relation to the «real», or the world we take for granted, must rest on a more generic level. There must be some characteristics that appear in *all* pictures, since it has turned out that children who grew up without pictures may without difficulty recognise the object depicted (Sonesson 1992: 134–136). However, it is important, before continuing, to mention in this connection that all pictures (as iconic signs) contain indexical and conventional elements to a certain degree.

The discussion about phenomenological and peircean (the notion of iconicity) influences to be found in Metz’s early film semiotics is now to be continued in the light of Sonesson’s work in semiotics, notably his substantial contributions to the development of pictorial semiotics on the basis of a cognitive and phenomenological bedrock. The study at hand concentrates on one aspect of this: the problem of iconicity and the motivated sign in film. But first I’ll very briefly say something about the cognitive dimensions in Metz phenomenological tackle of the problem of time in the ordinary world, and its rendition on screen—as he puts it in the first volume of his *Essais*—which could be further explained by some insights done in phenomenology.

### **Retentions and Protentions and our Understanding of Time**

From a phenomenological perspective Husserl’s notions of retentions and protention respectively, as Sonesson points out, are pivotal for our apprehension of time (Sonesson 1995). In a

[2] English translation: «Contrary to what I believed four years ago (notably in “The Cinema: Language or Language System?”), it does not seem at all impossible to me, today, to assume that *analogy is itself coded without, however, ceasing to function authentically as analogy in relation to the codes of the superior level*—which are brought into play only on the basis of this assumption» (Metz 1974: 114–115).

given frozen moment we expect a movement to continue in a certain direction, based on our experience of the lifeworld, Husserl's and Schütz's term for what we call 'the ordinary world'. Every movement therefore is expected to continue in time and to follow a certain trajectory. To reflect on a movement therefore implies some knowledge of a starting point and an ending point, and thereby renders time cognitively possible to us, thus a definition of time consciousness. The film *per se* develops in time on two levels: on screen (as a narrative) and off-screen (real time) / audience time. In that sense Husserl's definitions play an important role when analysing how film generates meaning, also in cases of artistic editing which often enough uses rhetoric means (norm breaking devices) to create an intended message.

### The Notion of Iconicity and How its Used by Metz

Peirce termed Hypoicons [...] signs which involve iconicity but also, to a great extent, indexical and/or «symbolic» (that is, conventional, or perhaps more generally, rule-like) properties (Sonesson 2008: 49).

There are three kinds of hypoicons: 1) images (based on similarity between expression and content and is of 'simple qualities' and is independent of the sign relation, i.e. the similarity between two object is there before they enter into a sign relation to *somebody*); 2) diagrams (the similarity «is one of 'analogous relations in their parts', i.e., showing relations existing in the world visually); 3) metaphors (Sonesson 2008: 49). In a peircean terminology one could also say that the iconic sign (as a Third) is a cognition of the Real (here defined as including as well the material as the immaterial state of things, and thereby differs from the phenomenological tradition emanating from Husserl's notion of the lifeworld, the paramount world).

Now, when Metz accounts for his iconic approach to film semiology—previous to the essay «Problèmes de denotations dans le film de fiction» — he expresses it in terms of «analogy». In Metz one might find hints of a hypoiconic elements in his description of the three levels that cinema consists of: 1) the film in itself (which cannot be misunderstood), 2) the film as an oeuvre and; 3) the film as ideology and rooted in a socio-cultural context (2 and 3 may be misunderstood by the viewer) (Metz 2003 [1968]: 76). One also feels the presence of some insights done by the Prague school (which Metz might have been familiar with in a broader sense through his readings of Roman Jakobson) and its development of a cultural semiotics. In the Prague school model for analysing cultural and artistic artefacts produced in a specific socio-cultural context, norms and conventions replace «codes» (Sonesson 1992: 108).

Why seems the notion of iconicity be indispensable for the study of film? The answer to this question might be: because photos/stills are iconic signs and iconic signs are motivated, i.e. they enter into a sign relation with its referent without, or at least to a limited degree, mediation of «codes» (since they are based on similarity) in contrast to the verbal language. However this similarity might be of two kinds, as Sonesson suggests in his theory about primary and secondary iconicity, a distinction of special interest in connection with «mute narratives» as for instance Béla Tarr's «Prologue» (part of *Visions of Europe*, 2004).

### Primary and Secondary Iconicity

Pictures/sign based on similarity with its object are of a primary iconicity when the perceiver (re)cognizes the resemblance without any «key» or «convention» or «code». On the other hand when the likeness only can be perceived once the sign function and character is known, the iconicity may be termed to be secondary (Sonesson 1992: 51). Doodles are clear examples of this:

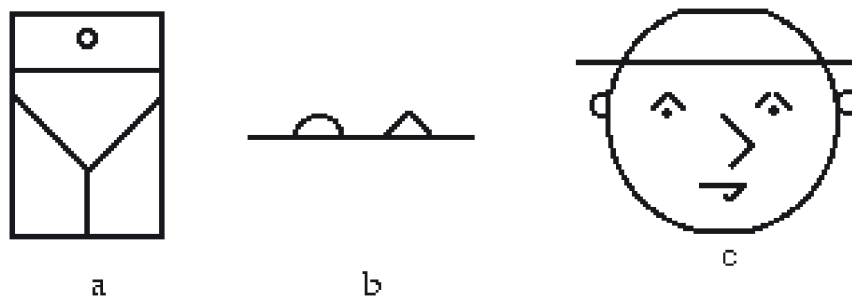


FIGURE 1. A) OLIVE DROPPING INTO A MARTINI GLASS OR A CLOSE-UP OF GIRL IN A BIKINI; B) CARRACCI'S KEY (A MASON WORKING BEHIND A WALL); C) A FACE OR A JAR (SONESSON 1992: 52).

Returning to our film example with a broader conception of secondary iconicity one might perhaps define 'Prologue' as a filmic example of secondary iconicity in a very broad sense — without wanting to suggest of course that the film would give rise to any doubts concerning its iconic nature — *but only to show that pictures consist of, to various degrees, indexical and conventional elements*<sup>[3]</sup>. If we as viewers of this film wouldn't have been provided in the beginning of the film with some keys as for instance production year, we might have interpreted the scene with the people standing in line waiting for the food to be distributed as a sign of a wealthy state giving their workers free food. Instead what we see is people queuing up outside the food bank, as a sign of a state incapable of providing jobs to its people who thereby is forced into this humiliating situation. Off-screen auteur-knowledge of Tarr support this latter view, as his reputation of being revolutionary and wanting to change social matters by showing empathy with his protagonists who, in one or another way, live in misery. The long take and the film's black and white photo adds to the impression of it being a documentary and thereby giving a trustworthy picture of the Real to the audience. Thus, the latter matters are question of convention, governing artistic norms and the repertoire of canonised works, in this case of European art film.

[3] Film/photographs are examples of iconic signs that are highly indexical. There is contiguity between the camera (or its roll of film) and its represented object, which made, so to speak an imprint on it.

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