

CHAPTER ONE

The Cognitive Turn in Film Theory

We have witnessed a number of attempts to by-pass [film theory's] most difficult conceptual problems by replacing it with something else. The "something else" is sometimes film history or aesthetics; sometimes it is a new object, such as television, popular culture, video; and sometimes it is a question of new methodologies, which may resemble dusted off methodologies from the social sciences, such as audience questionnaires or interviews, procedures that haven't benefitted from the literature in the social sciences that has interrogated its own methods and limitations. (Janet Bergstrom)¹

During the eighties, film studies gradually adopted 'new' methodologies from cultural studies and the social sciences, which displaced the speculative ideas of film theory. Rather than construct hypotheses and models about the general structure and spectators' experience of film, film studies has moved toward the 'something else' enumerated by Janet Bergstrom. However, a number of film scholars, in both Europe and North America, have persisted with film theory's most difficult conceptual problems, which they tackle from the perspective of cognitive science. This book is a report on the knowledge generated by these cognitive film theorists. But because this knowledge is fragmentary and incomplete, I have endeavored to expand and develop it in new and unforeseen ways.

However, for the most part, I do not report on the knowledge generated by the well-known cognitive film theorists in North America (David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, Edward Branigan, Joseph Anderson, among others) but discuss the much lesser known film theorists working in the cognitive tradition in Europe – particularly Francesco Casetti, Roger Odin, Michel Colin, and Dominique Chateau.²

Despite their similarities, the two groups evidence a marked

contrast in their work: Whereas the North American cognitivists decisively reject the basic doctrines of modern film theory (a.k.a. 'contemporary' film theory, based upon structural linguistics, semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis), the European cognitivists inaugurate a revolution in modern film theory by returning to and transforming its early stage – that is, the semiotic stage.³ Both groups therefore reject psychoanalysis and replace it with cognitive science. However, the European cognitivists assimilate cognitive science into a semiotic framework, whereas the North American cognitivists work within a pure cognitive framework (one untainted by semiotics).

Treating the work of a group of individuals as representing a homogeneous position is always risky. Nonetheless, all the North American cognitivists I have named belong to the Institute for Cognitive Studies in Film and Video, which to some extent unifies the agenda of the individual authors.⁴ What unifies the European cognitivists is that their work critically responds to Christian Metz's film semiotics. This response involves transforming Metz's semiotics by means of theories of pragmatics, cognitive science, and transformational generative grammar (which is in fact one of the main research programs in cognitive science). The European cognitivists attempt to overcome the 'translinguistics' of Metz's film semiotics – that is, Metz's insistence that film semiotics be based exclusively on the methods of structural linguistics – by combining semiotics with pragmatics and cognitive science. Structural linguists over-emphasize language's rigid, limiting capacity, and a semiotics based exclusively on structural linguistics conceptualizes all other semiotic systems in a similarly rigid manner – limiting and conditioning the meaning of human experience – at the expense of the language user's reflective and creative capacities to manipulate signs. By combining semiotics with cognitive science, the European cognitivists restore the balance and begin to conceptualize natural language and other semiotic systems as both enabling and limiting. Because of the dual emphasis in the work of the European cognitivists on semiotics and cognitive science, I shall call them the 'cognitive film semioticians'.⁵ Figure 1 shows the relations among the classical film theory of the 1930s–1950s, modern film theory, the North American cognitivists (from now on, simply 'the cognitivists'), and the cognitive film semioticians.

In this book I aim to outline the common theoretical assump-

1. CLASSICAL FILM THEORY
 - (a) Montagists (Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, etc.)
 - (b) Realists (André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, etc.)
2. MODERN FILM THEORY (a.k.a. 'contemporary' film theory)
 - (a) Film semiotics (Christian Metz of *Film Language, Language and Cinema*)
 - (b) Post-structural film theory (a.k.a. second semiotics, psycho-semiotics): Marxist and psychoanalytic film theory of Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe, Metz of *The Imaginary Signifier*, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean-Louis Baudry, Raymond Bellour, etc. (the transition from 2a to 2b was effected by theories of enunciation based on the linguistics of Benveniste)
3. COGNITIVE FILM THEORY
 David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, Edward Branigan, Joseph Anderson, Torben Grodal, Ed Tan, Murray Smith
4. COGNITIVE FILM SEMIOTICS (development from 2a)
 - (a) New theories of enunciation (Francesco Casetti, Metz of *The Impersonal Enunciation*)
 - (b) Semio-pragmatics of film (Roger Odin)
 - (c) Transformational generative grammar and cognitive semantics of film (Michel Colin, Dominique Chateau)

Fig. 1

tions held by cognitive film semioticians and clarify their relation to the broader traditions of twentieth century intellectual thought. Cognitive film semiotics represents the next stage – and arguably the maturation of – semiotic film theory. Despite the revolution it has inaugurated, cognitive film semiotics remains virtually unknown in Anglo-American film studies. This is unfortunate because it develops a more informed understanding – than either semiotics or cognitive science alone – of film's underlying structure, together with the way spectators comprehend films. By writing this book I hope to introduce cognitive film semiotics to the Anglo-American community of film scholars and, more generally, encourage a re-evaluation of the role of semiotics in film theory.

Before outlining cognitive film semiotics, I shall briefly review the cognitivists' position, particularly their reasons for rejecting linguistics and semiotics as viable paradigms for studying film. I

shall also attempt to point out several problems with their purely cognitive-based film theory.

To what extent is the dispute between modern film theory and cognitivism based on conceptual disagreement, and to what extent is it simply based on misunderstanding? Briefly, I shall argue that the cognitivists' criticism of the psychoanalytic dimension of modern film theory is based on conceptual disagreement and, moreover, that this disagreement is partly justified. However, I shall also argue that the cognitivists' critique of the linguistic and semiotic dimensions of modern film theory is based on misunderstanding, which has led them to refute its premises falsely.

If film theory is to make any advances, it needs to establish the grounds for disagreement among its various schools and must identify misunderstandings. Peter Lehman argues that scholars should develop a dialogue with other scholars. He asks: "How do we teach students to respectfully argue with the perspectives of their peers or teachers if the materials that they read encourage them to dismiss those critical methodologies and film styles with which they are not in agreement?" And: "Students should also realize that what they can learn from someone may have little or nothing to do with their agreement with that person's methodology or critical judgement."⁶ Similarly, Noël Carroll argues that "film theorizing should be dialectical," adding: "By that I mean that a major way in which film theorizing progresses is by criticizing already existing theory. Some may say that my use of the term 'progresses' here is itself suspect. However, I count the elimination of error as progress and that is one potential consequence, it is to be hoped, of dialectical criticism. Of course, an even more salutary consequence might be that in criticizing one theoretical solution to a problem, one may also see one's way to a better solution."⁷ Carroll's recent position is to develop a dialogue with, rather than simply condemn, previous theories of film.

In the following review of cognitivism, I do not aim to be dismissive, but to be critical. This involves clarifying misunderstandings so that we can leave behind us the old disagreements and make advancements by tackling new disagreements.

The cognitivists find very little of value or interest in modern film theory, although in *Narration in the Fiction Film* Bordwell acknowledges the value of some early semiotic work, such as Christian Metz's *grande syntagmatique*.⁸ Yet Bordwell undermines this

acknowledgement in Chapter 2 of the same book when he asks the following questions:

Why . . . is the employment of linguistic concepts a necessary condition of analyzing filmic narration? Is linguistics presumed to offer a way of subsuming film under a general theory of signification? Or does linguistics offer methods of inquiry which we can adopt? Or is linguistics simply a storehouse of localized and suggestive analogies to cinematic processes?⁹

I shall take each question in turn. Moreover, I shall use my responses as an opportunity to review the previous research carried out in the name of film semiotics.

1. *“Why . . . is the employment of linguistic concepts a necessary condition of analyzing filmic narration?”*

The simple answer is that the employment of linguistics is *not* necessary to the analysis of filmic narration. Bordwell is right to criticize Metz’s translinguistic standpoint. Metz initially made the mistake of arguing that linguistics is a necessary condition for analyzing filmic narration because he equated film language with narrativity: *“It is precisely to the extent that the cinema confronted the problems of narration that . . . it came to produce a body of specific signifying procedures.”*¹⁰ However, he challenged this equation in *Language and Cinema*,¹¹ a book that marks the maturation of his semiotic thinking on film. Perhaps we could turn this question back to Bordwell and ask, Why is his historical poetics of cinema predominately a poetics of narration?¹²

2. *“Is linguistics presumed to offer a way of subsuming film under a general theory of signification?”*

The short answer to whether linguistics subsumes film under a general theory of signification is yes. To think of film within a general theory of signification has many consequences, several of which I shall outline.

Film semiotics is a project that does not consider ‘film’ to be an unproblematic, pregiven entity, but reflects on the very nature of film’s existence, together with the consequences it has on culture and society. Semioticians challenge the commonsense ideological understanding of film as a mere form of harmless entertainment, maintaining that it is a system of signification that articulates experience. This is a relevant framework in which to examine film be-

cause the more complex a society becomes, the more it relies upon systems of signification to structure, simplify, and organize experience. The fundamental premise of semiotics is that “the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs.”¹³ Semiotics offers an all-embracing theory of human culture – or, more precisely, of human experience, belief, and knowledge. It is a theory in which humans are posited to have an indirect – mediated – relation to their environment. I will argue that natural language plays a decisive role in this process of mediation, of enabling individuals to control and understand their environment. But natural language is not all-encompassing, for human culture consists of numerous other semiotic systems – such as film – that also mediate between individuals and their environment. Perhaps it is relevant here to note that my discussion is limited to anthroposemiotics (the study of human signs) and does not cover zoosemiotics (the study of animal communication), although both are united under biosemiotics (the study of communication generated by all living organisms). Linguistics, the study of natural language, is one of the dominant branches of anthroposemiotics but has a very small role to play in biosemiotics and is not involved in zoosemiotics.

Studying film from a semiotic perspective does not involve comparing it to natural language (although this is one of the secondary consequences of conducting a semiotic analysis of film), but involves first and foremost analyzing film’s specificity. In film semiotics, specificity is defined in terms of the invariant traits manifest in all films, the traits that confer upon film its distinctiveness, which determines its unique means of articulating and mediating experience. Film semioticians define specificity not in terms of film’s invariant surface (immediately perceptible) traits, but of its underlying (non-perceptible and non-manifest) system of invariant traits. This semiotic perspective opposes the work of the classical film theorists, who also studied filmic specificity. However, they defined specificity in terms of film’s immediately perceptible traits, a focus that resulted in their formulating two mutually contradictory theories of filmic specificity. Rudolf Arnheim argued that filmic specificity lies in unique ‘distorting’ properties (especially montage) that demonstrate film’s specific representation of perceptual reality – its presentation of a unique perspective on reality. However, André Bazin argued that its specificity lies in the ability – for the first time

in the history of art – to record ‘reality’ without the intervention of the human hand (that is, he argued that film’s specificity lies in its existential link to reality). He advocated that filmmakers not subsume film’s ability to record under distortive techniques such as montage. Instead, he advocated a style of filmmaking to exploit the recording capacity of film – such as the long take, deep focus, and camera movement – which maintains the film’s existential link to reality. Metz sought to surmount these two mutually contradictory theories by defining specificity in terms of film’s underlying system of invariant traits. To present an understanding of what ‘underlying system of invariant traits’ means and how it enabled Metz to surmount the contradictions of classical film theory, I need to give an overview of semiotics.

Semiotics is premised on the hypothesis that all types of phenomena have a corresponding underlying system that constitutes both the specificity and intelligibility of those phenomena. The role of theory in semiotics is to make visible the underlying, non-perceptible system by constructing a model of it. A model “is an independent object which stands in a certain correspondence with (not identical with, and not completely different from) the object of cognition and which, being a mediating link in cognition, can replace the object of cognition in certain relations and give the researcher a certain amount of information, which is transferred by certain rules of correspondence on the object of modelling. The need for a model arises when for some reason immediate analysis of an object is inexpedient or impossible.”¹⁴

The first step in developing a semiotic film theory is to construct a model of the non-perceptible system underlying films, which involves identifying the properties and parts of this underlying system, together with the way they interrelate and function. The resulting model is expressed in a series of hypotheses, or speculative propositions. These propositions are not obviously true or false but are probable. The validity of these probable propositions and the models they construct is dependent on both internal and external criteria. Internally, hypotheses and models must display logical consistency. Externally, they must be able to analyze existing phenomena and ‘predict’ the structure of new phenomena. Semiotic film theory can be validated or invalidated on the basis of its logical (in)consistency, as well as its (in)ability to attribute structure to a given or new film – which involves relating the film to the semioti-

cian's prior model of the underlying system. In other words, external validity is dependent upon the model's possession of generality – its ability to be applied to all phenomena, given and new.

Metz attempted to construct a general model of the system underlying all films. His first model, to be discussed, is the *grande syntagmatique*; his second, developed in *Language and Cinema*, attempts to define filmic specificity in terms of a specific combination of five overlapping traits – iconicity, mechanical duplication, multiplicity, movement, and mechanically produced multiple moving images.¹⁵ Taken individually, Metz realized, none of these traits is specific to the cinema; the specificity of cinema, he argues, lies in their specific combination. These five traits are not simply heaped together but are organized into a particular system, which Metz models in terms of overlapping circles, similar to a Venn diagram (although Metz does not go so far as to visualize this model; this is what I have done in Figure 2). Filmic specificity for Metz consists of the five traits and of the system that organizes them. Notice that Metz does not draw any direct comparisons between film and natural language in this semiotic model of film. Although it is possible to question the logical consistency of Metz's mode of reasoning in *Language and Cinema*, my aim in discussing this book is simply to outline the semiotic model Metz developed there. The primary problem with this model is its generalizability, because it leaves out some avant-garde films that do not employ mechanical duplication (for example, the films of Len Lye) and films that do not employ movement (the most celebrated example is Chris Marker's *La Jetée*).

Like other semiotic studies, film semiotics adopts the two tier hierarchy between perceptible and non-perceptible levels of reality and formulates probable hypotheses describing this underlying, non-perceptible level. The ultimate objective of film semiotics is to construct a model of the non-perceptible system underlying all films. Whereas Saussure called the specific underlying system of natural languages *la langue*, in opposition to the surface phenomena, *la parole*, Noam Chomsky calls the underlying system competence, in opposition to performance, and for Metz, the specific underlying system of film is called cinematic language, in opposition to individual films.

The function of a model is therefore to mediate between a theory and its object of study. Semioticians do not commit the fallacy of identifying the real object with the object of knowledge because

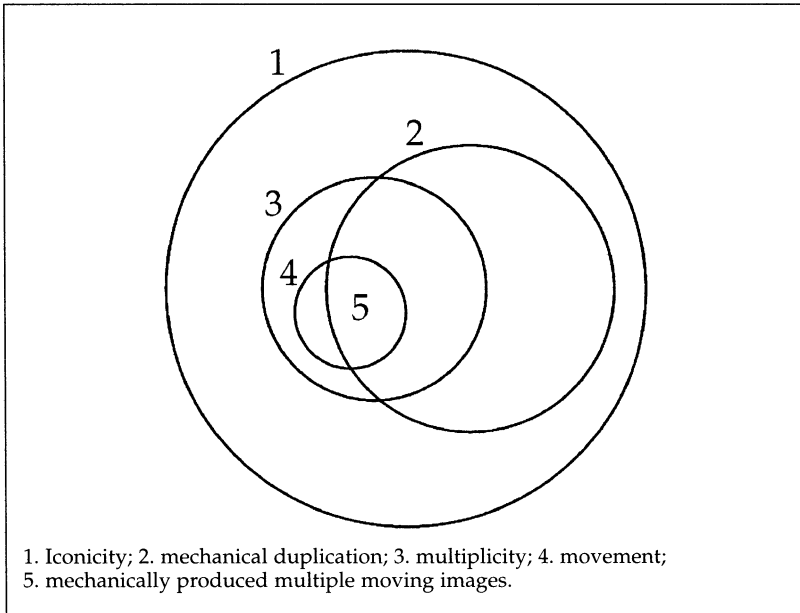


Fig. 2

they realize that each theoretical framework does not *discover* its specific object of study but must *construct* it, precisely because the object of study is inaccessible to perception. Saussure realized this in relation to the specific object of semiotic study: "The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint adopted which creates [*crée*] the object."¹⁶ For Samuel Weber, "This assertion marks out the epistemological space of Saussure's theoretical effort, and to neglect its far-reaching implications has inevitably meant to misconstrue the status of his arguments."¹⁷ In order not to misconstrue Saussure's arguments, I need to point out that semiotics *constructs* a model of its object of study; it does not *create* its object of study (despite Saussure's use of the verb *créer* in the preceding quotation).

To answer adequately Bordwell's second question – "Is linguistics presumed to offer a way of subsuming film under a general theory of signification?" – we need to go further into semiotic theory. The underlying system is "an imperceptible content lending structure to the perceptible insofar as it signifies and conveys precisely the historical experience of the individual and group."¹⁸ Semioticians call this non-perceptible, underlying system, which lends

structure to the perceptible, a system of codes. One of the integral (although by no means encompassing) codes of human culture is natural language. It is a species-specific system that distinguishes humans from animals and that humans use to develop a shared understanding of the world.

A system of codes consists of the prior set of finite, invariant traits of a language, together with their rules for combination. Speech (*la parole*) is generated by two processes: Codes are selected from the underlying system, and they are combined according to rules. Both processes constitute the intelligibility of speech because meaning is the product of the structural relations that exist between the codes. Speech can then be analyzed in terms of the underlying system of codes that generated it.¹⁹ In semiotics, 'code' is therefore a term that designates the underlying system that constitutes the specificity of, lends structure to, and confers intelligibility on phenomena.

In analyzing film from a semiotic perspective, film scholars bring to film theory a new level of filmic reality. They successfully demonstrate that the impression of unity and continuity each spectator experiences at the cinema is based on a shared, non-perceptible underlying system of codes that constitutes the specificity of, lends structure to, and confers intelligibility on the perceptible level of film. Early film semioticians applied the structural linguistic methodology of segmentation and classification to identify the non-perceptible system underlying a film. The setting up of this hierarchy – between the perceptible level of film and the non-perceptible system of codes underlying it – is the main contribution semioticians have so far made to film theory. They show that filmic continuity is a surface illusion, what Marxist critics call the 'impression of reality'. In effect, semiotics enables film theorists to drive a wedge between film and its referent, to break the supposedly existential link between them, and to demonstrate that filmic meaning is a result of a system of codes, not the relation between images and referents.

Once film semioticians identified the hierarchy between the perceptible and the non-perceptible, what were their main 'objects' of study? Very simply, they began to construct models of the various underlying systems that determine the surface – perceptible – level of film. It is at this point that film semioticians moved away from analyzing cinematic language (or filmic specificity) and created a