FILM THEORY IN MEDIA HISTORY

SPACES OF COMMUNICATION

ELEMENTS OF SEMIO-PRAGMATICS

ROGER ODIN

Amsterdam
University
Press

Amsterdam
University
Press

Spaces of Communication

Amsterdam
University
Press

Film Theory in Media History

Film Theory in Media History explores the epistemological and theoretical foundations of the study of film through texts by classical authors as well as anthologies and monographs on key issues and developments in film theory. Adopting a historical perspective, but with a firm eye to the further development of the field, the series provides a platform for ground-breaking new research into film theory and media history and features high-profile editorial projects that offer resources for teaching and scholarship. Combining the book form with open access online publishing the series reaches the broadest possible audience of scholars, students, and other readers with a passion for film and theory.

Series editors
Prof. Dr. Vinzenz Hediger, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany
Weihong Bao, University of California, Berkeley, United States
Dr. Trond Lundemo, Stockholm University, Sweden

Editorial Board Members
Dudley Andrew, Yale University, United States
Raymond Bellour, CNRS Paris, France
Chris Berry, Goldsmiths, University of London, United Kingdom
Francesco Casetti, Yale University, United States
Thomas Elsaesser, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Jane Gaines, Columbia University, United States
Andre Gaudreault, University of Montreal, Canada
Gertrud Koch, Free University of Berlin, Germany
John MacKay, Yale University, United States
Markus Nornes, University of Michigan, United States
Patricia Pisters, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Leonardo Quaresima, University of Udine, Italy
David Rodowick, University of Chicago, United States
Philip Rosen, Brown University, United States
Petr Szczepanik, Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic
Brian Winston, Lincoln University, United Kingdom

Film Theory in Media History is published in cooperation with the Permanent Seminar for the History of Film Theories.

Amsterdam
University
Press

Spaces of Communication

Elements of Semio-Pragmatics

Roger Odin

With an Introduction by
Vinzenz Hediger

Amsterdam University Press

Les espaces de communication @ 2011 by Presses Universitaires de Grenoble – Traduit par Ciaran O'Faolain avec l'aide de la Région Rhône Alpes

Translation: Ciarán Ó Faoláin

Cover illustration: Roger Odin photographed by his son Paul Emmanuel

Cover design: Suzan Beijer
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 714 2
e-ISBN 978 90 4853 866 9
DOI 10.5117/9789462987142
NUR 670

Creative Commons License CC BY NC ND
(http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0)

© The authors / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2022

Some rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, any part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise).

Amsterdam
University
Press

Table of Contents

A Democracy of Readings and Objects: Roger Odin's Contribution to the Theory of Film 9
Vinzenz Hediger
What We Make of Images and Sounds: Semio-Pragmatics as Approach and Method 12
Establishing a Discipline, Cultivating a Field: Roger Odin and Film Studies in France 17
Moving Semiotics Forward: Semio-Pragmatics and Film Theory since the 1960s 21
Beware of the Crypt: Semio-Pragmatics and the Question of Communication 29
After the Elegy of Cinema: Semio-Pragmatics and the State of Film Studies 31

Spaces of Communication: Elements of Semio-Pragmatics 35
Roger Odin

Foreword and Acknowledgements 37

Introduction: The Semio-Pragmatic Model 41
On the Difficulty of Getting Away from Immanence 41
On the Difficulty of Staying Within Immanence 43
Vacillation 45
For an Articulation between the Two Paradigms: Semio-Pragmatics 46
The Semio-Pragmatic Model 48

1. **Context, Constraints and the Space of Communication** 55
Universally Shared Constraints 55
Natural Constraints 56
The Narrative Constraint 58
The Case of Languages 62
Language and Perception 63
The Influence of a Language on How We Read Images 64

"Non-Natural" Constraints and the Notion of the "Space of Communication" 66

2. The Discursive Space: Communicative Competence and Modes of Production of Meaning 71
Fictionalizing Mode (First Approach) 75
Spectacularizing and Energetic Modes 77
Documentarizing Mode, Moralizing Mode 81
Fictionalizing Mode (Second Approach); Fabulating Mode 84

3. Aesthetic Mode, Artistic Mode: Relationship between Modes and Spaces 89
From the Aesthetic Mode to Aesthetic Spaces 90
From the Artistic Mode (in Reduced Form) to Inscription in the Space of Art 94
From the Artistic Mode (Full-Fledged Form) to the Spaces of Art 97
Relationship among Modes and among Spaces 101

4. Contextual Analysis and the Space of Communication: The Space of Communication of Family Memory 105
The Space of Communication for Memory in the “Traditional” Family 106
  The Constraints and the Construction of the Actants 106
  Which Mode(s) to Construct? Private Mode, Intimate Mode 107
  Communication Operators 110
The Space of Communication for Memory in the New Family Structure 114
  “Freed-Up” Communication 116
Testimony Mode: Another Mode of Production of Meaning 116
  Other Memory Operators 117

5. The Space of Communication and Migration: The Example of the Home Movie 123
The Home Movie: From Archives to Loci of Memory 123
The Home Movie on Television 127
From Home Movie to Micro-Histories 130
The Home Movie in the Space of Art 133
The Home Movie in the Medical Context 136

6. Textual Analysis and Semio-Pragmatics 141
A Stage of the Tour de France on Television 142
Interpreting the Reproduction of a Painting 146
Collective Academic Research 148

The Space of Description and the Construction of the Object of Analysis 150
From the Space of Textual Analysis to the Space of Interpretation 152
The Space of Ideological Analysis 154
The Space of Epistemological Reflection 155
The Place of Cinema in the Academic Institutional Space 156

Conclusion 157

List of Tools 161

The Different Stages of Construction of the Semio-Pragmatic Model 163

Bibliography 165

Index 173

Amsterdam
University
Press

A Democracy of Readings and Objects: Roger Odin's Contribution to the Theory of Film

Vinzenz Hediger

Odin, R., *Spaces of Communication: Elements of Semio-Pragmatics*. With an Introduction by Vinzenz Hediger. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022
DOI 10.5117/9789462987142_INTRO

Amsterdam
University
Press

Abstract
Semio-Pragmatics, an approach to the study of film and audiovisual media first proposed by Roger Odin in the early 1980s, shifted the focus from textual analysis to the interaction of text and context and to institutional modes of framing and reading which shape the viewer's engagement with the film. A response to an impasse in post-1968 film semiotics and semio-psychoanalytical approaches to film spectatorship, semio-pragmatics contributed significantly to the further development of film studies alongside such approaches as Cultural Studies, neo-formalism, historical reception studies and the phenomenology of film. At the same time, by expanding the scope of inquiry beyond the dispositive of cinema from the outset to include home movies or mobile phone films, semio-pragmatics defined film studies as a field rather than a discipline exclusively focused on the cinephile canon, thus anticipating the current shape of that field by more than two decades.

Keywords: Film theory, film semiotics, non-theatrical film, media theory, communication theory

The last thing a new discipline acquires, Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, are its foundations. The purpose of this book series, which makes key texts from the history of film theory available to a broad academic and non-academic audience, is to offer some contributions towards that goal for the still fairly young discipline of film studies. The inclusion of Roger Odin's *Spaces of Communication*, which first appeared in French in 2011 and was translated into German in 2019, fulfils the series' purpose in exemplary fashion.[1] *Spaces of Communication* is a book that condenses the intellectual trajectory of one of the foundational figures of film studies into a relatively short and accessible volume. It is a book that testifies to the author's deep and rich intellectual engagement with a vast array of objects ranging from the classics of the cinephile canon to television news programmes, home movies and mobile phone films. But it is also text which has the potential to contribute towards the growth of film and media studies for years to come.

In this Introduction I want to offer a brief discussion of the position of the book in relation to Odin's intellectual trajectory. I will then situate Odin's work with a view to both the institutional history of film studies and the history of film theory since the 1960s, with a particular view to the concept of communication. Finally, I want to discuss how Odin's work intersects and communicates with some of the most important current developments in the field of film and media studies.

---

[1] Roger Odin, *Kommunikationsräume. Einführung in die Semiopragmatik*. Trans. by Guido Kirsten, Magali Trautman, Philipp Blum, Laura Katharina Mücke, (Berlin: oa books, 2019).

What We Make of Images and Sounds: Semio-Pragmatics as Approach and Method

One way of accessing *Spaces of Communication* is to follow the instructions of the subtitle and read the book as a concise introduction to semio-pragmatics, the theoretical approach to film and media which, for all practical purposes, bears Odin's name. Film semiotics focused primarily on semantics and syntactics, i.e., the meaning-making properties of image and sound and their articulation in narrative and other temporal sequences. The semantics of the Western, to cite Rick Altman's classic semiotic analysis of the genre, concern themselves with the iconographic lexicon of cowboys in rugged landscapes, horses, cattle, guns, coffee and beans; the syntactics focus on recurring plot structures.[2] As the name indicates, semio-pragmatics shifts the focus from semantics and syntactics to what in linguistics is the third leg of the field, pragmatics or the usage of signs. Or, to stay with the example of the Western: pragmatics concerns what we make of all those plots, hats, horses, guns, coffee cups and beans.

Odin inaugurated semio-pragmatics as a theoretical approach in his "thèse d'état," which he completed in 1982.[3] He further developed his approach in various essays and his subsequent books, *Cinéma et production de sens* (1990), an introduction to the semiotics of film from a semio-pragmatic point of view, and *De la fiction* (2000), which, as the title says, takes the problem of fiction and non-fiction as its focus.[4]

---

[2] Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre," *Cinema Journal,* 23/3 (Spring 1984), pp. 6–18.

[3] The "thèse d'état" is a substantial written work which comes after the dissertation proper and used to be the formal requirement for the qualification for thesis supervision. In 1984, it was replaced with the "habilitation à diriger des recherches," analogous to the German "Habilitation," which qualifies the holder for full professorship positions.

[4] Roger Odin, *Cinema et production de sens* (Paris: Amand Colin, 1990); Roger Odin, *De la fiction* (Bruxelles: De Boeck Université, 2000). For a survey of Odin's trajectory see the Introduction by Frank Kessler and Guido Kirsten to the German translation of *Spaces of Communication* and the comprehensive bibliography and filmography compiled by Hans-Jürgen Wulff and Ludger Kaczmarek in the Appendix to this volume.

To simplify, semio-pragmatics argues that meaning is not just a matter of text, but of context. What a film means depends not only on what it says and how it says it, but also on where and when it says it and to whom. Far from opening another French theory door to the twin evils of subjectivism and relativism which critics of post-structuralism so heartily decry, the "where," "when" and "whom" of semio-pragmatics are not indeterminate variables. Rather, they consist in highly specific institutional framings and settings. These determine to a significant extent how viewers will approach a film or set of moving images, and how they will read them. Accounting for these specific variations, Odin spells out his theory of the production meaning first in a typology of "modes de lecture," of modes of reading and the viewer's engagement with the world of the film.

A mode of reading can be more accurately described as a mode of producing meaning and affect. It consists of a set of specific, repeatable cognitive and affective operations, which are applicable to different types and bodies of work. These operations constitute a body of (largely) implicit knowledge which the viewer activates when dealing with a film or program, a communicative competence which can be culturally and situationally specific but remains relatively stable over time.

Apart from the problem of text and context, an important impulse for Odin to develop his approach came from his thinking about documentary. When documentary theorists in the 1980s and 1990s argued that the line separating documentary from fiction had become blurry,[5] they responded to new types of documentary, but also to an underlying conflict within film theory. Bill Nichols had developed an influential typology of modes of documentary practice in the mid-1970s, which he has since further developed to accommodate new trends.[6] But in film theory, and particularly in France, the line separating documentary from fiction had never been clearly set. Instead, two equally totalizing and seemingly mutually exclusive claims competed with each other, one which associated cinema with reality, the other which associated it with the imaginary. These claims reflect, in a way, the grand struggle between Lumière and Méliès in French film history: Lumière, the inventor of documentary, vs. Méliès, the inventor of the fiction film – or the other way around, as Jean-Pierre Léaud famously argues in Godard's *La Chinoise* from 1968, in which he references Henri Langlois to suggest that Lumière was a painter of sorts and the last great impressionist and Méliès a purveyor of current news.

---

[5] See for instance Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[6] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 99–138.

Bazinian ontologies – sometimes implicitly, often explicitly – awarded a privileged connection to reality to all filmic representations as they defined the photographic image as trace, index or "natural image," i.e., a sign which participates in the being of the object and re-presents reality in an emphatic way.[7] Different from Bazinian reality, the Lacanian real was not present in the image. It was defined precisely as that which could not be represented. Accordingly, Lacanian accounts stressed the lack of reality in the cinematic signifier and the viewer's relation to the screen, which was merely a replay of the child's discovery of the mirror, i.e., the imaginary relationship of the self to its own image. Christian Metz summarized this position most forcefully, when he declared in *The Imaginary Signifier* that "every film is a fiction film."

A young psychologist from Belgium, Jean-Pierre Meunier had tried to solve the problem in 1969 by offering a typology of film experiences which associated the three stages of Sartre's phenomenological conception of the imaginary with the home movie, the documentary and the fiction film respectively. But his book went largely unnoticed at the time and resurfaced only in the context of home movie research in the 1990s and again in more recent debates about the phenomenology of film.[8]

To answer the question of how we understand a documentary film, Odin made a more radical move. He applied Ockham's razor to the underlying assumptions of the debate so far and cut both the concepts of reality and the imaginary out of the equation. Neither did he rely primarily on classifications of textual properties of the kind offered by Bill Nichols. Instead, Odin argued that whether a film was a documentary was a matter of labelling and processing or framing and reading. He proposed the concept of a "documentarizing reading" and further suggested that certain films lent themselves to such readings, or rather advertised themselves to invite such readings.[9] In a carefully worded retort to Metz's claim that every film was a fiction film – a retort which can be read as a condensed summary of the systematic difference between Metzian semiotics and semio-pragmatics –, Odin even claimed in a 1984 essay that every film *could be read* as a documentary film.[10] What made a documentary, then, was the meeting of a certain mode of reading with a suitable text – which is not a tautology, but a precise instruction for textual analysis and the modelling of the viewer's activity from a pragmatic point of view.

---

[7] Vinzenz Hediger, "Das Wunder des Realismus. Transsubstantiation als medientheoretische Kategorie bei André Bazin," in: *Montage AV* 18/1 (2009), pp. 75–107.

[8] Cf. Daniel Fairfax, Julian Hanich (eds.) *The Structures of Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier: Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

[9] See also Frank Kessler, "Fakt oder Fiktion? Zum pragmatischen Status dokumentarischer Bilder," in *Montage AV* 7/2 (1998), pp. 63–78.

The third important impulse for the development of semio-pragmatics, apart from the problems of text and context and documentary and fiction, came from Odin's interest in home movies.[11] Jean-Pierre Meunier can claim to have published the first work of film theory in which home movies figure prominently. But the "film-souvenir," the memory film, as Meunier called it, served mostly as a steppingstone to a theory of the fiction film, which was the real focus of his interest.[12] For Odin, on the other hand, home movies were a genuine "theoretical object" in the sense of Hubert Damisch, an object which "obliges one to do theory."[13] Home movies are a ground zero of semio-pragmatics because in dealing with them, no other approach to textual or semiotic analysis makes much sense. Devoid of the formal and textual properties which provide the basis for auteurist and other work-centred approaches to analysis and interpretation, the meaning of home movies lies almost exclusively in the uses their makers make of them.

From the comparison between fiction, documentary and home movie readings, Odin developed a typology of eight distinct modes of reading, a list which slightly varied over time: the spectacular, the fictionalizing, the energetic, the private, the argumentative/persuasive (which in *Spaces of Communication* has been replaced by the discursive mode), the artistic and the esthetic modes. While Odin's typology remains open to the inclusion of additional modes – more recently, his thinking has included a "making of"-mode –, the modes of reading are in themselves fairly consistent and quite distinct from each other. To borrow an analogy from sociology, they have roughly the consistency of Weberian ideal types. They owe their relative stability to an important extent to that of their corresponding institutional frameworks – e.g., the cinema, the art world, the school, the family.

---

[10] Roger Odin, "Film documentaire, lecture documentarisante," in: Roger Odin, Jean-Charls Lyant (eds.) *Cinémas et réalités* (Saint-Étienne: CIEREC, 1984), pp. 263–277.

[11] Roger Odin (ed.) *Le film de famille: Usage privé, usage public* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1995).

[12] See the interview with Meunier in Fairfax, Hanich, *Meunier.*

[13] Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss and Hubert Damisch, "A Conversation with Hubert Damisch," in: *October* 85 (Summer 1998), p. 8. See also Alexandra Schneider, "Theorie des Amateur- und Gebrauchsfilms," in: Bernhard Groß, Thomas Morsch (eds.) *Handbuch Filmtheorie* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2021), pp. 225–242.

As Odin further developed the question of the relationship of text and context, he came up with a concept which ties together the various ensembles or assemblages of frameworks, settings, and modes of reading. He moved to embed the modes of reading in what he proposes to call "spaces of communication," which constitutes the key conceptual innovation of the book which we are presenting here, and which provides its title.[14]

Significantly, as readers of this book will discover, the list of modes of readings and of spaces of communications includes academic readings of film and the space of the university. By placing the work of professional interpreters of film on equal footing with, for instance, home movie screenings, Odin subtly undercuts claims to hermeneutic privilege and authority even as it validates academic readings on their own terms. Semio-pragmatics proposes what we might call a democracy of meaning making, built on the idea of the equality and diversity of a wide array of possible modes of reading. But this democracy of meaning making is also one of objects. If semio-pragmatics awards no special privilege to academic readings, neither does it award one to theatrical fiction films.

Odin is of course not oblivious to the persistence of social hierarchies and power differentials. Of the major French film theorists, he is the one who is closest in spirit to Bourdieu, as his discussion of the coercive aspects of the institution of the nuclear family or the legacies of French colonialism in this book shows. Odin's democracy of objects and readings has political thrust but deploys it at the level of methodology. Like the epoché in phenomenology it serves to bracket certain aspects of reality. By suspending established stratifications and distinctions, it manages not to replicate them in research designs and theoretical frameworks, squarely putting them in the focus of analysis instead. Through the democracy of readings and objects, in other words, semio-pragmatics turns the stratified field of culture into a level field of inquiry.

To understand the point of the concept of "spaces of communication" and of semio-pragmatics' continuing and potentially growing relevance to contemporary film and media studies, it is useful to take a short look back and place Odin's contribution in the larger context of semiotics and film theory. Specifically, semio-pragmatics can be understood as the solution to one of the key problems of the semiotics of film as it first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, even as it addresses some of the shortcomings of the

---

[14] Odin had first used the term "fictional space of communication" at the end of the 1980s, but only returned to the concept of "spaces of communication" for the publication of this book.

Amsterdam University Press

approaches which emerged in cinema studies in response and as alternatives to the semiotics of film in the 1980s and 1990s.

Establishing a Discipline, Cultivating a Field: Roger Odin and Film Studies in France

Born in 1939, Roger Odin belongs to the generation of film scholars who grew up in and were formed by the culture and atmosphere of post-war cinephilia.[15] A linguist by training, a film club activist and a consummate amateur filmmaker, Odin became the first film scholar to ascend to a full professorship in cinema studies in a French university when he moved to Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle from Saint-Étienne in 1983.

Film scholars had, of course, worked in French research institutions before. Christian Metz held a position in the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, a research institution in Paris which includes disciplines ranging from history to anthropology and economics, and which has also been the home of scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Nora, Jacques Derrida or, more recently, Thomas Piketty. Raymond Bellour had joined the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, another non-university "grand établissement," at the invitation of Edgar Morin in 1964. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier created a department of cinema from within French literature at the experimental university of Paris-Vincennes in the early 1970s, an important step towards film studies as a discipline. In *Spaces of Communication*, Roger Odin pays tribute to her work with a subchapter dedicated to a re-reading of Ropars-Wuilleumier's pioneering publications of that time. Furthermore, historians like Pierre Sorlin, Michèle Lagny or Marc Ferro focused their research on cinema from their respective positions in sociology and history departments.

But the department of cinema and audiovisual media at Paris-3 was to become the first proper film studies department in a French university. Odin moved quickly to expand the department with chairs in film aesthetics for former *Cahiers* critic Jacques Aumont and in film history for Michel Marie, who had written his dissertation under Ropars-Wuilleumier's and Metz's supervision and joined Paris-3 as a maître de conference (assistant professor) for cinema in 1974. Together with Aumont and Marie, Odin continued to expand the scope and size of the department during his twenty-year tenure as its director, to the point where the department is now the largest of its kind in the world in terms of full professor positions, including one exclusively dedicated to the study of the economics of cinema currently held by Laurent Creton.

---

[15] Antoine de Baecque, *La cinéphilie. Invention d'un regard, histoire d'une culture, 1944-1968* (Paris: Pluriel, 2013).

Odin was also instrumental in the creation of a doctorate in film studies at the national level. Decisions concerning the shape and structure of academic disciplines in France are in the hands of the national ministry of tertiary education and research rather than in the hands of individual universities. The doctorate as granted by the ministry is the birth certificate of a discipline. Roger Odin led a committee which developed a curriculum in cinema studies comprised of optional courses in secondary education, as well as undergraduate, graduate and doctoral degrees at the tertiary level. Following the committee's recommendation, the ministry created film studies doctorate in the early 1990s.[16] This emancipated cinema studies from the neighbouring disciplines of literature, art history and history and secured its place among established subjects for tertiary education and research. It granted a license to universities across France to institute doctoral programs and departments in cinema studies. In quick succession, with Lyon-2, Rennes, Bordeaux and Montpellier among others emerging as new centers of film studies from the 1990s onwards.

Throughout his tenure at Paris-3 and beyond, Roger Odin has always insisted that he considered cinema studies to be a field rather than a discipline. This is an important distinction both in the light of the history of cinema studies in France and with a view to its development in a broader perspective. It is also a distinction which helps us understand how Odin's work as a theorist intersects with his work as an institution builder.

One of the countries that lay claim to the invention of cinema, France has always had a uniquely vibrant film culture. It was built and fostered by institutions such as the ciné-club movement, which started in the 1920s and in which Roger Odin actively participated as a programmer and presenter during his years in Saint-Étienne. It was also built around institutions like the Cinémathèque française, which Henri Langlois established in the early 1930s just as film archives sprung up around the world as salvage institutions for film history in the wake of the introduction of sound. French film culture was further sustained by a film criticism striving to elevate film to equality with the other arts, an effort best exemplified by the work of André Bazin and the *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s. Since the 1920s, the operative concept which brought all facets of French cinema culture together had been the notion of the director as *auteur*. First introduced to distinguish French films from the American competition in the 1920s, it became a selection criterion that served to distinguish art from mere merchandise and build canons of significant works in a global perspective from the 1930s onwards.

---

[16] Roger Odin, "Zur Etablierung der Filmbildung in Frankreich – Ein Erfahrungsbericht," in: Malte Hagener, Vinzenz Hediger (eds.) *Medienkultur und Bildung. Ästhetische Erziehung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke* (Frankfurt: Campus 2015), pp. 295–312.

However, the first attempt to establish film studies in France had little to do with cinephilia or auteurism. The Filmology movement of the 1940s and 1950s was organized by producer/philosopher Gilbert Cohen-Séat at the Sorbonne, with help from Étienne Souriau, an eminent philosopher and France's foremost aesthetic theorist at the time, and Henri Wallon, a leading developmental psychologist who first described the mirror stage, which later made the fame of Jacques Lacan.[17] As a top-down effort to study and control the social effects of cinema in the wake of the Second World War, Filmology initially met with scorn from cinephiles. A young Jean-Luc Godard signed up to quell the concerns of his Swiss bourgeois parents about his lack of interest in academic study, but he appears to never have attended classes. In 1951, André Bazin published a fierce polemic against the "filmologues" and their ignorance of cinema in the *Cahiers* under the pseudonym of Florent Kirsch (combining the first name of his son and the maiden name of his wife).[18] The controversy petered out towards the end of the 1950s, when Filmology shifted its focus to television and eventually morphed into mass communication effects research in France and Italy.

When film studies finally found its place in the French university system in the 1980s the cinephile canon constituted the core of the curriculum. Universities are conservative institutions. Once a plausible claim could be made that cinema had produced a body of work equivalent to that of national literatures – a claim which the *Cahiers* critics had established and which Stanley Cavell strategically repeated in 1971, when he wrote in the Introduction to *The World Viewed* that classical Hollywood cinema had brought forth more masterpieces than the Elizabethan period in literature[19] – chances improved for cinema studies' acceptance as a discipline. Absent mandarin champions of the stature of Souriau and Wallon, it was ultimately the combination of a solid grounding in the academic rigor of structuralist linguistics and semiotics and cinephile culture which created the conditions of acceptance for film studies as an academic subject. Incidentally, this applies to both France and the United States, and in both cases the path to success led through Paris. Through his seminars at the EHESS, Christian Metz had taught the first generation of university professors "what research was," as Jacques Aumont once put it.[20] Metz's students also included numerous young American scholars, who would become the first and second generation of film professors in the United States. In the US, film studies emerged from literature departments, with the department of romance studies at Iowa with Dudley Andrew, a biographer of André Bazin and specialist in French cinema, playing a particularly important role in training the first generation of cinema studies PhDs.[21]

---

[17] Edmund Lowry, *The Filmology Movement and Film Studies in France* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press 1985); François Albéra, Martin Lefebvre (eds.) *La filmologie, de nouveau*, double issue of *CINéMAS: Revue d'études cinématographiques/Journal of Film Studies*, 19/2-3 (spring 2009); Vinzenz Hediger, Guido Kirsten (eds.) *Filmologie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming).

[18] Florent Kirsch [André Bazin], "Introduction à une filmologie de la filmologie," in: *Cahiers du cinéma*, 5 (1951), pp. 33–38.

[19] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

Roger Odin is part of that group – a student of Christian Metz's who is nothing if not firm in his command of the cinephile canon. Yet even as he emerged as a pivotal figure in the consolidation of cinema studies as a discipline focused primarily on the history and aesthetics of fictional theatrical films as art, he continued to insist that film studies is a field rather than a discipline. Film Studies' cinephile pedigree had distinct advantages, of course. It connected the new academic discipline to a dynamic set of cultural practices, including highly sophisticated forms of film criticism as art criticism, which kept cinema studies from prematurely veering off into scientist pretensions even as it demonstrated the standards of rigor required of an accredited member of academia. But Odin managed to translate this energy into a broader set of potentials. Explicitly referencing filmology as a model and strategically naming the new department "Cinéma et audiovisuel," Odin kept the door open for the inclusion of new methodologies and objects of inquiry beyond cinema, and he contributed to this opening through his own work. One of Odin's most widely quoted and translated essays, which he co-wrote with Francesco Casetti, is "De la paléo à la néo-télévision" from 1990, a text which analyses a major shift in television aesthetics and mode of address from the 1960s to the 1970s and continues to be a key reference in television studies.[22] And as the department in Paris-3 grew, additions include permanent positions for television studies.

---

[20] Personal communication with Jacques Aumont.

[21] For a survey of Metz's role in the formation of academic film theory and his intellectual legacy cf. Dominique Chateau, Martin Lefebvre, "Dance and Fetish: Phenomenology and Metz's Epistemological Shift," in *October* 148 (Spring 2014), pp. 103–132; Margrit Tröhler, Guido Kirsten (eds.) *Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema: Film Semiology and Beyond* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

But insisting on a definition of film studies as a field rather than a discipline also creates a problem. Scientific disciplines emerge and coalesce around well-defined objects. Biology as a discipline only comes into existence with the theory of evolution, which defines life as a continuous historical process, a definition further corroborated by the description of the cell as the smallest unit and building block of life as a self-organizing process. The cinephile canon is cinema studies' theory of evolution: a simple, neat definition which separates its object from that of other, neighboring disciplines. Stressing the field character of film studies means to abandon the safety afforded by that definition. One other way of understanding semio-pragmatics is as a solution to this epistemological conundrum: the concepts of modes of reading and of spaces of communication provide an epistemological bracket, a principle of unity, for the diversity of readings and objects to which semio-pragmatics ascribes equal value. Or, to put it differently: these concepts broaden the scope of inquiry beyond a singular object and its corresponding discipline, while at the same time securing the coherence of the field.

In that sense, there is in Roger Odin's work as a theorist and an institution builder a remarkable and, for an academic, rather unique convergence of thought and action, of theory and practice. But to fully appreciate the contribution of semio-pragmatics to the field of film studies it is important to also situate Odin's approach more specifically within the history of film theory.

Moving Semiotics Forward: Semio-Pragmatics and Film Theory since the 1960s

In retrospect, the original promise of semiotics can probably best be described as that of a *prima philosophia* for media culture and, in fact, for culture understood as a set of practices of meaning making more generally. In the able hands of authors like Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco or Yuri Lotman, Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the sign worked like a Swiss Army knife of cultural analysis: easy to handle and variable in use, it cut across everything, from comics to novels, movies and magazine covers to car designs and spaghetti packaging, so long as the object in question could be described as a text and broken down into relationships of signifier to signified. And even though the connection of signifier to signified remained arbitrary (at least in the case of non-indexical signs) and many of the meanings created through that connection turned out to be deeply troubling, the concept of the sign provided a philosophically soothing sense of unity not just of an object of study upon which one could build a discipline, but unity in the face of the increasingly bewildering diversity of contemporary culture and society and its signifying practices.

---

[22] Francesco Casetti, Roger Odin, "De la paléo- à la néo-télévision," in *Communications* 51 (1990), pp. 9–6.

Following close on the heels of Barthes and others – but also borrowing some of his key concepts and insights from Étienne Souriau and Filmology –, Roger Odin's teacher and mentor Christian Metz inaugurated the semiotics of film in a double move: he narrowed the focus of analysis to the dominant mode of narrative cinema and its technological infrastructure and social frameworks, and he stressed the linguistic origins of semiotics. "La grand syntagmatique du cinema" was an attempt to spell out in rigorous scientific terms the implications of André Bazin's famous throw-away line at the end of his essay on the ontology of the photographic image: "On the other hand, cinema is also a language."[23] As it turned out, the language of cinema did not quite have the structural consistency of a natural language. But semiotics still prevailed.

Spreading from France to other parts of Europe, the anglophone world and the Global South (and with significant additional lines emerging from Eastern Europe and the Tartu school) semiotics became the dominant paradigm in film theory in the 1960s and 1970s. Metz, Baudry, Bellour and Kuntzel in France and Laura Mulvey, Stephen Heath and others in Great Britain and the US combined it with Lacanian psychoanalysis and, in some strains, with Althusser's neo-Marxist analysis of the ideological effects of the state apparatus to build a critical analytics of film spectatorship which resonated strongly with the political outlook of post-68 cinema culture.[24] In the hands of Mulvey the combination proved to be particularly potent. Mulvey provided an account of the regressive politics of gender in classical Hollywood cinema which continues to reverberate in debates about intersectional feminism and queer theories of spectatorship to this day.[25]

---

[23] André Bazin, "Ontology of the Photographic Image," transl. Hugh Gray, in: *Film Quarterly*, 13/4 (Summer 1960), pp. 4–9.

[24] For a comprehensive history of post-68 French film culture and film theory see Daniel Fairfax, *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma (1968-1973): Volume I. Ideology and Politics* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021); *Volume II. Aesthetics and Ontology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

[25] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in: *Screen*, 16/3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

However, the very feature that made the combination of semiotics and psychoanalysis so compelling as an elegy of the failed revolution of 68 turned out to be a liability in the long run. The emphasis on the ideological determinism of the "apparatus" restricted the spectator's subjectivity to a mere afterthought of a pernicious interplay of technology and text. To many scholars coming up in the 1970s and 1980s particularly in anglophone film studies, this no longer seemed to be a useful account of spectatorship. In succession, Cultural Studies, a combination of neo-formalism and cognitive science, historical reception studies, the phenomenology of film experience and Deleuzian approaches to the philosophy of film emerged as compelling alternatives.

Cultural Studies is a multi-faceted field which covers some of the same territory as semiotics and emerges at the same time, to the extent that it could be seen as its British counterpart: what the Citroen DS is to Barthes, dime novels and television are to Raymond Williams. At its intersection with media studies Cultural Studies offered an alternative to the linear models of communication and media effects in communication research. Stressing the activity and agency of the viewer, Stuart Hall highlighted the possibility of oppositional readings of (mass) media texts and the ability of the viewer to engage with normative representations of ethnicity and gender even as they maintained their sense of identity and difference.[26] This approach became highly influential in anglophone television studies of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as in studies of film stars and popular cinema.

The combination of neo-formalist film analysis and cognitive psychology, which took shape in the United States and Germany in the 1980s through the work of authors like David Bordwell, Peter Wuss and Hans-Jürgen Wulff, offered another account of the active spectator, albeit one that was willingly oblivious to questions of context, identity and difference. Particularly in Bordwell's formulation it proposed a model of spectatorship as a largely disembodied mode of information processing. Bordwell even claimed at one point that it was perfectly possible to build a model of how audiences understand a film without accounting for the role of affect and emotion – a point that was disproven not least by a subsequent generation of cognitivist scholars like Murray Smith and Ed Tan in their work on spectatorship and emotion.[27]

---

[26] Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," in: Meenakshi Gigi Durham, Douglas M. Kellner (eds.) *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009), pp. 163–174; Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," in: *Framework* 36 (1989), pp. 68–81.

[27] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London, New York: Routledge, 1985); Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Another response to the disembodied and decontextualized concept of spectatorship proposed by early cognitivist theories consisted in historical reception studies, an approach pioneered by authors such as Janet Staiger, a co-author with Bordwell and Kristin Thompson on the groundbreaking 1985 book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, or Annette Kuhn.[28] Historical reception studies reconstruct the viewer's experience from reviews, scrapbooks, diaries and other historical sources.

In a more theoretical vein, the phenomenology of film experience, which Vivian Sobchack pioneered in opposition to the then dominant semio-psychoanalytic paradigm, stresses the corporeal and tactile dimensions of spectatorship, substituting for the transcendentalist notion of the gaze, which had been a cornerstone to Lacanian notions of spectatorship, the viewer's engagement with the body of the film.[29]

And finally, Gilles Deleuze offered a critique of both the semiotic concept of the sign and the psychoanalytic concept of the gaze in his two books on cinema.[30] Both sign and gaze, Deleuze argued, stood for absences and implied a lack – of the object depicted, and of the object desire by the subject of the gaze. They were transcendentalist notions which offered an abstract, impoverished account of cinema, which a philosophy of film should replace with an account of the image in its immanence.[31] Following through on his critique Deleuze did away entirely with the concept of the spectator and replaced it with a typology of images inspired by pragmatist philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Pierce (even though some of his readers argued that his notion of the fold could be read as a theory of spectatorship, of the folding of the viewer into and out of the image[32]).

One way of describing the place of semio-pragmatics in the history of film theory is to say that Roger Odin set out to solve the same problem

---

1995); Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996).

[28] Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: J.B. Tauris, 2000); Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London, New York: Routledge, 2019).

[29] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

[30] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

[31] Gilles Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous. Textes et entretiens* (Paris: éditions de minuit, 2003), pp. 263ff.

[32] Raymond Bellour, "Le dépli des émotions," in *Trafic* 43 (2002), pp. 93–128.

to which this succession of models and approaches responded, but from within semiotics. How can we escape the narrow focus and determinism of a semio-psychoanalytic model of spectatorship in the classical dispositive of cinema? Metz himself had opened a pathway in his influential essay "The Fiction Film and its Spectator." Quite against the grain of some of his more determinist readers, he described his theory of spectatorship as site-specific and situated. It applied mostly, Metz wrote, to the cinephile culture of Paris, but it may not apply in the same way to other settings. "We have only attempted *one* ethnography of the spectator, among others remaining to be done," Metz wrote. As a note of caution, he added that going forward Freudian notions would "be perhaps less helpful and certainly less directly useful, since they were established, despite their pretensions, in an observational field with cultural limits."[33] Semio-pragmatics can be understood as a systematic exploration of the field of inquiry which that admission opened up. Maintaining the original framework and rigor of Metzian film semiotics but shifting the focus to pragmatics, Odin developed the concept of modes of reading as an account of spectatorship which is highly differentiated, but also clearly delineated, i.e., attuned to specific constellations of sound and image in varying institutional and pragmatic settings – constellations which include, but are far from limited to the dispositive of the cinema and the practices of cinephilia. Furthermore, semio-pragmatics is concerned with specific films, and with the surface of films rather than with depth. In a discussion of the difference between Bellour's concept of "blocage symbolique" and his own notion of the "mise-en-phase," the viewer's phasing in with the formal operations of the film, Odin argues that Bellour stresses the importance of deep-seated cultural meanings and scenarios, such as the patterns of sexual desire in modern societies of the nineteenth and twentieth century, whereas semio-pragmatics proposes to have the closest possible look at how such orders manifest themselves on the surface of a given film, i.e., in the relations inside the diegesis and the relation between a viewer and film.[34] *Surfaces, singularities, site specificities*: if the problem of semiotics is indeed the transcendentalism of the concepts of sign and gaze, what we may describe as the three "s" of semio-pragmatics provide the contours of an immanentist approach to film from within pragmatics itself.

---

[33] Christian Metz, "The Fiction Film and Its Spectator: A Metapsychological Study," trans. Alfred Guzetti, in *New Literary History,* 8/1 (1976), pp. 75–105, here p. 100.

[34] Roger Odin, "Mise en phase, déphasage, performativité," in *Communications* 38 (1983), pp. 213–238.

Amsterdam University Press

Film theory is not a horse race, and while paradigm skirmishes broke out among the various approaches which I just sketched out in the 1980s and 1990s,[35] contemporary film studies is a surprisingly harmonious field, at least by the standards of larger and more consolidated disciplines like literature, philosophy or sociology, where paradigm wars structure much of the disciplinary debates. But since our aim here is to understand the place of semio-pragmatics in the broader field of film theory, it can still be useful to engage in a brief exercise of compare and contrast.

Cultural Studies maintained a focus on mass media and popular culture and proved to be particularly productive in the analysis of television and later fan cultures and fandom; semio-pragmatics' scope of inquiry encompasses practices ranging from cinephile and the art world to marginal media practices like home movies or educational films. Cognitivist approaches focus on a binary relationship of film and viewer; semio-pragmatics develops a ternary model: each mode of reading and space of communication includes text, context and viewer, which means that spectatorship is necessarily situated. Historical reception studies focus on historical practice; semio-pragmatics maintains a strong focus on theory and with it the ability to respond and adapt to emergent new media practices and modes of spectatorship. Phenomenological and Deleuzian approaches stress the embodied and immanent nature of spectatorship and the engagement with the image; semio-pragmatics offers an account of spectatorship as embodied and situated by spelling out for each space of communication the specific constituents of its ternary model.

Another axis along which these approaches can be compared concerns the degree of freedom and spontaneity they assign to the viewer. At one end of this spectrum we find the ideological determinism of post-68 semio-psychoanalysis, which largely shares with Adorno the assessment that mainstream cinema is an assembly line for commodified subjectivities. At the other end we find Cultural Studies, and more specifically fan studies. *Textual Poachers*, the title of Henry Jenkins's 1992 book,[36] which was based on his dissertation under the supervision of one of the pioneers of Cultural Studies, John Fiske, makes this point: if cinephilia is a form of reverence for the text, fans approach popular texts with a mixture of dedication and irreverence. Their fidelity is to their own emotional response to the text rather than to the text itself, which they treat as a resource for their own artefacts and inscriptions. Fandom is a transgressive form of meaning making, an extractive rather than a pious form of devotion – hence "textual poaching." Semio-pragmatics occupies a middle ground between these two poles. It is heedful of the strictures which text and context, or cinematic form and institutional framing, impose on a given mode of reading or space of communication. But it also allows for, and helps us understand, re-framings and reappropriations in a highly specific way.

---

[35] David Bordwell and his school were particularly vocal in their criticism of what they perceived to be the then-dominant paradigm of psychoanalytic film theory and hermeneutic approaches to film. Cf. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); David Bordwell, Noel Carroll (eds.) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

[36] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992).

An example may serve to illustrate this balance.

Almost twenty years ago, I curated a program of movie trailers for a video art festival in Basel, Switzerland. The pièce de résistance of the program was a ten-minute trailer for Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* from 1956. Produced as a multi-purpose short film which could be screened as a trailer in theatres and as an educational short in 16mm prints in schools, this trailer features Cecil B. DeMille in a wood-panelled office delivering a lecture on the historical sources of his film. DeMille addresses his audience with paternalistic aplomb: this is America's filmmaking history teacher speaking. One by one, he produces for the camera objects ranging from papyrus scrolls to a scale model of Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses and a replica of the marble plates on which the Ten Commandments were supposedly incised. The short film ends with a selection of scenes from the film, over which DeMille voices a series of questions, following a standard template of trailers from the 1950s. Having appeared on camera in similar fashion in his trailers since the 1920s, DeMille in his wood-panelled office cuts a familiar figure for contemporary American audiences – so familiar, in fact, that Alfred Hitchcock chose to advertise *The Birds* with a parody of DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* trailer, in which he can be seen delivering a lecture about "our feathered friends." In my trailer program, the Hitchcock trailer followed immediately after the *Ten Commandments* short. But the audience did not need to be educated about possible divergent readings of DeMille's trailer. It chose to develop one itself, spontaneously. To every new object the audience responded with roaring laughter, for the full ten minutes of the film's run time.

In her work on genre theory and reception history, Janet Staiger has shown how films can change their genre over time – or rather how they can be gradually re-classified and re-labelled.[37] But there is nothing gradual about the re-classification the Basel audience operated on the DeMille short film. Theirs is also not a camp reading. Theorists like Benjamin Buchloe think that camp is a form of mockery of the ruling order. But there is “no position of superiority in camp,” as Juliane Rebentisch argues: “The camp relation to its objects of choice is, to the contrary, one of siding with failure and decay.”[38] The Basel audience was not laughing with or in support of DeMille, but at him, and however old and decaying he may have been in 1956, he was clearly sitting at the top of a social hierarchy which had lost little of its purchase on people’s lives since then. So mockery of the ruling order yes, camp reading no. What it was is an audience of festival goers watching a program in an evening sidebar, ready for entertainment after a hard day’s work of engaging with serious video art and experimental films. What they collectively chose to do is pick up on a structural feature of the film, the regular intervals at which DeMille produced his historical artefacts. They chose to respond to the educational short much as they would to a sitcom episode, in which gags are spaced out at similar intervals.

---

[37] Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 61ff.

This experience demonstrates an insight from one of Odin’s earlier texts, which is key to the entire project of semio-pragmatics: namely that the “traitement filmique,” the cinematic form, functions in a certain way, but has no determined function (“Tout en ayant un fonctionnement spécifique, le niveau du traitement filmique n’a pas de fonction specifique”[39]). Far from prescribing their position in any definitive way, it engages the viewer’s affects and moves her along in the process of constructing the world of the film. But the element of indeterminacy remains. The fact that the cinematic form functions in a certain way, but is not fully determined in its function, allows the viewer to phase out, for instance to be bored and lose interest, or to phase in with a different set of affects. The options, however, remain limited and prescribed by the way the film functions.

This exactly describes the actions of the Basel audience. Rather than be educated, they chose to be entertained – they were, after all, sitting in a cinema, in the evening, after a full day of work. They chose to relabel the text and approach it in accordance with the label they chose. But in their contrarian preference for entertainment, they remained faithful to the text, or at least to what it ineluctably prescribed – not, admittedly, to its tone, but to its structure. Neither cinephiles nor fans, not engaged in pious or extractive devotion, they behaved rather like a group of scrupulous

---

[38] Juliane Rebentisch, “Camp Materialism,” pp. 242–243.

[39] Roger Odin, “Mise-en-phase, déphasage, performativité,” in: *Communications* 38 (1983) p. 214.

Amsterdam University Press

semioticians having a ball. As radical as their reframing and repurposing of the DeMille short may seem, it is well within the boundaries defined by the text and the context, and well within the boundaries of the space of communication of the festival.

A key criterion for the validity of a theory is elegance, and semio-pragmatics certainly offers the most elegant explanation of what a festival audience did with, or rather to, a DeMille film on that night in Basel twenty years ago.

Beware of the Crypt: Semio-Pragmatics and the Question of Communication

We have noted the alignment of thought and action in Odin's work as a theorist and an institution builder. We have also noted his pioneering work on home movies, amateur films and, most recently, mobile phone films.[40] This is another area of convergence of theory and practice in Odin's work. Odin was always a filmmaker as well as a theorist. His body of work includes more than fifteen short films, mostly documentaries. On 6 December 2020, Odin uploaded a twenty-minute video film shot with a mobile phone to YouTube entitled *Méfiez vous de la crypte!*[41] The film consists of observations in the style of diary entries, commented by Odin himself in voice-over. It covers the period from March to November 2020, i.e., the first eight months of the COVID-19 lockdown, which Odin and his wife Andrée spent in their country home, a modest restored farmhouse in a rural section of the Haute-Loire. The video chronicles Odin's work in and around the house, his viewing of television news, his readings (of Francis Ponge, among others), etc. It is both a diary film and the work of a theorist in action, a work of reflection on the lockdown and its mediated condition through the format of the video/mobile phone film. Odin, we are given to understand at the outset, films almost like he breathes. If the writer's motto is to never spend a day without writing – "nulla dies sine linea" –, the film theorist/filmmaker Odin's motto is to never spend a day without filming.

The film's climax consists in a montage of shots of an empty white bathtub which has been repurposed as a drinking trough for cows and graces a green pasture near Odin's house. Odin records that he returns to the bathtub and films it every day, and sometimes even at night. "The videos testify to a transfer upon that object, to a proper fixation," Odin comments. "There is a coherence to this choice of object, and my way of filming it." The images make him understand that the space of confinement of the lockdown defines his way of filming. And he recognizes what draws him to the tub and what he sees in it: himself. Unable to focus on writing during the lockdown, his head had been empty ("J'avais la tête vide"). Instead, he was drawn to the bathtub and started to film it obsessively. Citing psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Török, Odin describes the bathtub as a repository of experiences which cannot be represented and assimilated into conscious memory: a crypt.

---

[40] Roger Odin, "Spectator, Film and the Mobile Phone," in: Ian Christie (ed.) *Audiences* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), pp. 155–169; Laurence Allard, Laurent Creton, Roger Odin (eds.) *Téléphonie mobile et création* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014).

[41] https://youtu.be/ZpsUJoeAnrs

Recently, John Mowitt has also used Abraham's and Török's concept of the crypt to raise the question of communication and film in a discussion of David Bowie's last video work, "Lazarus."[42] Film scholars have tended to avoid the concept of communication, not least to distinguish themselves and their object from the field of mass media and communication studies. As Christian Metz put it, cinema "goes beyond communication strictly speaking" since "it does not authorize the immediate play of bilateral exchange." But then, Metz continues, "it is not the only semiotic system to behave in this way; nothing directly responds to a myth, to a folk tale, to a ritual, to a culinary or a clothing system, to a piece of music."[43] The reversal of terms in Metz's observation is striking: what moves cinema beyond communication is not the lack of response from its semiotic system; it's the lack of direct response from the viewer.[44]

That we must nonetheless speak of communication is one of the underlying assumptions of Odin's work, one which he makes explicit with the concept of "spaces of communication." In Metz's seminar, Odin had found an ally in Francesco Casetti, who broadened the scope of film semiotics in his 1984 book *Dentro lo sguardo* (translated into English as *Inside the Gaze* in 1999)[45] to study the ways in which films directly address spectators and take their engagement into account. Metz, in turn, responded to both Casetti and Odin in his last book, *Impersonal Enunciation, or The Place of the Film* (originally published in 1993 and translated in 2016),[46] in which he insisted that a thorough analysis of the film's enunciatory patterns was sufficient to understand how films are understood, and no account of the viewer's engagement was required. Against Metz, and moving beyond Casetti's focus on the fiction film, Odin's semio-pragmatics consistently focused on how the viewer does respond, if indirectly, to the semiotic system of the film. The concept of "spaces of communication" further embeds the semiotic system of the film in specific settings and framings. German sociologist Niklas Luhmann has emphasized what he called the "improbability of communication." As Daniel Lee writes, "regardless of how much people believe they have in common [...] it is not due to their regional, national or cultural backgrounds" that they manage to successfully communicate and build a society. Rather, it is "by employing established systems of communication, building new understanding upon what was successfully communicated in the past."[47] Semio-pragmatics offers a fine-grained analysis of such established systems of communication, and the Basel experience illustrates, among other things, how little shared background matters for a group of people to successfully communicate with each other over and through a film. But the DeMille example exemplifies not just the improbability of communication and how it is overcome. It also points towards an element of indeterminacy, which implies a possible failure to communicate. That is, in a way, also the message of the empty bathtub. It marks an internal boundary in the space of communication. "Méfiez vous de la crypte!" means that we must not just be able to account for the improbable event of communication. We must also account, in the spaces of communication, for that which goes beyond communication, the possibility that communication is, strictly speaking, not possible.

---

[42] John Mowitt, *Tracks from the Crypt* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2019). https://meson.press/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/978-3-95796-003-0-Mowitt.pdf

[43] Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*. Translated by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague and Paris: Mouton & Co., 1974), p. 288.

[44] Having first stated his stance on cinema and communication in the late 1960s, Metz continued to elaborate his take through the 1980s. Cf. Christian Metz, "Théories de la communication vs. Structuralisme. Sur la notion de communication," in: *Mise au Point* 8 (2016), https://doi.org/10.4000/map.2121.

[45] Francesco Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and Its Spectator*. Translated by Nell Andrew, with an Introduction by Christian Metz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

After the Elegy of Cinema: Semio-Pragmatics and the State of Film Studies

As it emerged from cinephilia and established itself as an academic discipline, film studies rephrased Bazin's argument about the ontology of the

---

[46] Christian Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or The Place of Film*. Translated with an Introduction by Cormac Deane, afterword by Dana Polan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[47] Daniel Lee, "The Society of Society.: The Grand Finale of Niklas Luhmann," in: *Sociological Theory*, 18/2 (2000), p. 323.

Amsterdam University Press

photographic image in the language of semiotics and defined cinema as a photochemical image technology with a privileged bond to reality (and index), a site of public projection, which also happens to encapsulate a model of the modern public sphere as an open, accessible, but ultimately homogeneous space (the dispositive),[48] and a limited body of works from directors from a limited number of countries (the canon).

Cinema is currently undergoing a transformation that can be described as a triple crisis of the index, the dispositive and the canon.[49] Digitization has turned the photographic image from an index into a graph. The moving image has always also been an image in movement, but it has become more so in the age of digital devices, platforms and streaming.[50] Whereas the cinema used to be a model for the modern public sphere, moving image culture now consists of a multitude of publics in different, interconnected but distinct spaces,[51] which – illustrating Sarah Sharma's point that while publics used to be "almost solely understood as spatial constructs, they are also temporal"[52] – also means different temporalities. As a consequence, we can also no longer deny that the history of film has long included much of which even the most knowledgeable gatekeepers of Western film culture have been unaware.

We now live, so the diagnosis goes, in an age of post-cinema – a formula which appears to capture one of the key aspects of the transformation, but also conveys a melancholy attachment to cinema's classical dispositive.[53]

To the triple crisis of index, canon and dispositive many film theorists of Odin's generation have responded with books and essays which either diagnose an "explosion" of cinema[54] and a "cinema éclaté"[55] or offer elegies for cinema in its former shape and form.[56] Roger Odin has written no such book. Instead, he has published books on mobile phone films, and he has written *Spaces of Communication*. It is a book which offers an approach to all kinds of objects which would not traditionally have been identified as "cinema." It is also a book which accounts for a wide variety of spatial arrangements of moving images beyond the cinema dispositive, without imposing a hierarchy. It is a book which endorses a democracy of spaces of communication and helps us account for their different, interconnected, but distinct temporalities.

---

[48] Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Specatorship and American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). See also the discussion of cinema and public sphere in Heide Schlüpmann, *Raum geben – der Film dem Kino* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2020).

[49] Vinzenz Hediger, "Illusion und Indexikalität," in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 54 (2006), pp. 1–10.

[50] Frank Kessler, "The Multiple Dispositifs of Early Cinema," in: *Cinémas* 29/1 (Fall 2018), pp. 51–66.

[51] Among the first to diagnose and account for this transformation apart from Roger Odin – and from within a Habermasian rather than a semio-pragmatic framework – was Miriam Hansen. Cf. Miriam Hansen, "Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Permutations of the Public Sphere," in: *Screen* 34/3 (Autumn 1993), 197–210.

[52] Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2014), 146.

[53] See for instance José Moure and Dominique Château (eds.) *Post-cinema: Cinema in the Post-art Era* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

[54] Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[55] Guillaume Soulez (ed.) *Le Cinéma éclaté. Formes et theories* (= *Cinémas* 29/1, Fall 2019).

Among many younger film scholars, the response to the transformation of cinema has been to similarly broaden the scope and redefine the objects of film studies to include non-theatrical films, "useful cinema" and other configurations of film beyond the dispositive of cinema.[57]

But Roger Odin has been at this for a long time.

When Odin insisted that film studies is a field rather than a discipline, and when he first developed semio-pragmatics as an approach to identify and analyse a broad variety of modalities of the moving image including, but not limited to, the cinema, he marked out what may at the time have seemed like a marginal position. But he was anticipating the shape of cinema studies to come. If semio-pragmatics can be read as a response to a key

---

[56] For instance, Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Bazin's Quest and Its Charge* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005); Raymond Bellour, *La querelle des dispositifs. Cinéma – installations, expositions* (Paris: P.O.L, 2012); Jacques Aumont, *Que reste-t-il du cinéma?* (Paris: Vrin, 2013); Schlüpmann (2020).

[57] See for instance Vinzenz Hediger (ed.) "Gebrauchsfilm 1"; "Gebrauchsfilm 2" (= special issues of *Montage AV*, 14/2 (2005), 15/1 (2006); Valérie Vignaux, *Jean Benoit-Lévy ou le corps comme utopie. Une historie du cinéma éducateur entre les deux guerres* (Paris: AFRHC, 2007); Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (eds.) *Films That Work: Industrial Cinema and the Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009); Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson (eds.) *Useful Cinema* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2011); Dan Streible, Devin Orgeron and Marsha Gordon (eds.) *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Yvonne Zimmermann and Pierre Emmanuel Jacques (eds.) *Schaufenster Schweiz. Dokumentarische Gebrauchsfilme 1896-1964* (Zürich: Limmat, 2011); Eef Masson, *Watch and Learn: Rhetorical Devices in Classroom Films after 1940* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Pascal Laborderie, *Le cinema éducateur laique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015); Oliver Gaycken, *Devices of Curiosity: Early Cinema and Popular Science* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Scott Curtis, *The Shape of Spectatorship: Art, Science, and Early Cinema in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Marsha Gordon and Allyson Nadia Field (eds.) *Screening Race in American Non-Theatrical Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Florian Hoof, *Angels of Efficiency: A Media History of Management Consulting* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Vinzenz Hediger is professor of cinema studies at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main.

Amsterdam
University
Press

problem of film theory and the semiotics of film in the period after 1968, the solution Roger Odin proposed has been such that film studies is now, in a way, finally catching up with him.

This is why the English translation *Spaces of Communication* could not come at a more auspicious and appropriate time.

***

A complete bibliography and filmography of Roger Odin's works compiled by Ludger Kaczmarek and Hans-Jürgen Wulff with a presentation by Guido Kirsten can be found here: https://mediarep.org/handle/doc/13732

Spaces of Communication: Elements of Semio-Pragmatics

Roger Odin

Amsterdam
University
Press

Amsterdam
University
Press

Foreword and Acknowledgements

My reflections on semio-pragmatics began in the 1980s and have continued up to this day without interruption, thus giving rise to quite a number of publications (see the bibliography for some of these). However, what I have to say in this book is fundamentally new. Even though the themes here are similar to those I have explored in previous publications, the way I approach them, but also the argument itself are, as a general matter, different. This is not only because I happened to change my mind on one or another point, and not only because since publishing previous books I have continued to work and thus to clarify certain points, but because the axis of reflection that runs all the way through this work requires that issues be addressed in a different light: this is the first time I have tried to theorize the notion of a *space of communication* and to show how it can be used in analyses.

I have long resisted the idea of writing a book on semio-pragmatics. Articles are more flexible – better suited to a process of reflection that is still in the making. A book makes the presentation of content more rigid and more conclusory – to say nothing of the risk of presumptuousness when one ventures to present one's approach. However, there comes a time where it seems necessary to try to make at least one provisional point, if only to take stock more precisely of where I am in the process of reflection. (Articles – and this is where their flexibility pays off – allow a certain vagueness when it comes to overall consistency, whereas a book does not). And still I had to make the decision to throw myself into the project.

This book would not exist without a kind request from Bernard Miège.

The proposal to publish it as part of a series on communication certainly helped things along: I initially conceived of semio-pragmatics as an approach that could work for all types of production, but up to then I had stuck almost exclusively to cinema and broadcasting. Publishing in this series has prompted me to work on more-varied output. Although there are still plenty of references to my own professional domain, I have also tackled other areas. I have greatly enjoyed writing this book, and I hope the general aim of the "model" I have set out will be clear.

Odin, R., *Spaces of Communication: Elements of Semio-Pragmatics*. With an Introduction by Vinzenz Hediger. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022
DOI 10.5117/9789462987142_FW

Amsterdam
University
Press

I cannot give enough thanks to those students and colleagues who had to put up with my various attempts at theorizing in various seminars, whether at the University of Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle, elsewhere in France, or abroad, and who, with their questions and their comments, and sometimes just by listening, allowed me to look back at my work and move forward with my research.

I would like to thank Isabelle Pailliart, Bernard Miège and Pierre Mœglin for reading the book with such a critical eye. I have taken full account of their comments, and even where I have not followed their suggestions, I have always benefitted from them one way or the other. It is rare in this day and age to find a book series that affords its authors critical readings of such high quality.

“Without a machine, one is sure, from the start, to see nothing.”
– Christian Metz

Amsterdam
University
Press

Amsterdam
University
Press

Introduction: The Semio-Pragmatic Model

There is a rather surprising observation to be made right at the starting point of semio-pragmatics: a great many theorists seem to have enormous difficulties deciding where they stand with regard to these two major paradigms: the immanentist and the pragmatic.

A look back at a couple of definitions:

> The *immanentist approach* posits the text or language [*langage*] as an entity endowed with permanent structural characteristics (a system in which each term has meaning only in relation to the system), an entity that it describes without reference to what lies outside it. As Ferdinand de Saussure put it: "Language [*la langue*] is a system that knows only its own order."[1] Classical semiology was built on these foundations.
>
> Conversely, *pragmatic approaches* hold that a sign, a word, a statement and a text make sense only in relation to the context in which they are sent and received. Theorists have different conceptions of what we are to understand by "relationship with the context." I regard *pragmatics* as comprising those approaches that put the *context* at the *starting point* of the production of meaning – that posit the context as *regulating* this production.

On the Difficulty of Getting Away from Immanence

A number of attempts by theorists to move away from the immanentist paradigm and enter the pragmatic have ended up running aground in a return to the immanentist.

---

[1] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Payot, 1986), p. 43.

Odin, R., *Spaces of Communication: Elements of Semio-Pragmatics*. With an Introduction by Vinzenz Hediger. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022
DOI 10.5117/9789462987142_INTRO2

Amsterdam
University
Press

This is true, for instance, of the theory of enunciation that was initially constructed as the analysis of the relationship between enunciation and the set of parameters in the communication setting (the sender, the receiver and the context, and the spatio-temporal circumstances, as well as the conditions of the production and reception of messages) – that is, as a pragmatic approach. This theory quickly gets to the point where it is boiled down to an analysis of "the imprint of the process of enunciation on the utterance."[2] This return to immanentism is often made in the awareness that one is missing something: Catherine Kerbat-Orrechioni[3] thus observes: "We are methodologically *bound* to the problematic of traces" [my emphasis].

The same goes for the pragmatics of speech acts (Austin, Searle), which are limited to studying how a text affects the reader. Thus the text still comes first. In the field of film studies, this movement is evident in the book *Western Graffiti* (1983) by Daniel Dayan, who, even as he shows his willingness to "move from one type of analysis oriented towards the text of a film to another oriented towards the viewer"[4] (a statement that seems to fall within the pragmatic paradigm), is devoted in fact "to the study of the effects of the *utterances*" on the viewer.[5] Moreover, the subtitle of the book is "Image Games and the Programming of the Viewer in John Ford's *Stagecoach*." We do not get away from the immanentist paradigm.

Here is one last example: the case of Umberto Eco, a theorist who, in 1962 [1989], wrote a book, *The Open Work*, which begins with this statement: "It is a fact that production and consumption may be at the origin of two objects that *are strangers to one another*."[6] It thus announces itself as a precursor to the pragmatic approach to texts. And there he is again in 1990, in *The Limits of Interpretation*, dedicating one of his first chapters to "an apology of the literal sense"[7] and setting himself the goal of "knowing what *one has to protect* in order to open it" [my emphasis].[8]

---

[2] Oswald Ducrot and Tzvelan Todorov*, Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) p. 405.

[3] Catherine Kerbrat-Orechioni, *L'énonciation. De la subjectivité dans le langage* (Paris: A. Colin, 1980), p. 32.

[4] Daniel Dayan, *Western graffiti. Jeux d'images et programmation du spectateur dans La chevauchée fantastique de John Ford* (Paris: Clancier-Guenaud, 1983), p. 269.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, (1989) [1962]), p. 11 [my emphasis].

[7] Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 53.

[8] Ibid., p. 55 [my emphasis].

Amsterdam University Press

On the Difficulty of Staying Within Immanence

One might think that, if it is hard to get away from immanence and turn to pragmatics, staying within immanence poses no problem – but that is just not so. Theorists who say they are adherents of immanence still find just as many difficulties staying within the immanentist paradigm as the theorists who seek a pragmatic approach in trying to escape the immanentist one. The world of theorists is really quite complicated….

The work of the semiologist Christian Metz is a remarkable illustration of this second movement. Few theorists, indeed, have claimed so vigorously that they belong to the immanentist paradigm. He has claimed that he has prioritized the study of systems, used a method based on the study of internal differences (distributional or componential analysis), and established typologies and taxonomies: a taxonomy of sequential constructs likely to appear in films (the famous *grand syntagmatic* [1968]), a taxonomy of languages [*langages*], a taxonomy of various types of "system," a taxonomy of the "codes" of cinematic language…. And the list could go on. His last book, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (2016 [1991]), is an immanentist manifesto if ever there was one. Metz states not only that the enunciator and the addressee are "parts of text"[9] but that, "in principle the reader only decodes what the writer produces, yet their respective activities move in opposite directions."[10]

The paradox is that the first gesture Metz made in founding the semiology of cinema was to construct cinematographic language as a "language without a language system" [*un langage sans langue*] (1968) and thus to place this approach from the get-go alongside the models of performance and pragmatics: "one finds oneself thrown back from the outset onto judgements that correspond to instances of acceptability (performance models) that come into play in the reception of the socio-cultural classes of users and the broadcast of film genres."[11] In Metz's first articles (1968), references to the work the viewer does to produce meaning figure prominently (*cf.*, for example, the notion of "induction current," which suggests that the viewer projects a narrative relationship between two shots). Even the *grand syntagmatique*, which is always cited as a model of the immanentist structural approach, was conceived to work for a class of films (fiction films) that is delimited historically (classic fiction films produced from 1930 to 1955 or thereabouts). External (that is, not immanent) considerations thus determine the construction of the model. At first glance, *Langage et Cinéma* (1971) would seem to be farther from these pragmatic concerns. In it, Metz insists, however, that even if cinematographic language can be described as a combinatory of codes, only the notion of the subcode can explain how it works at any given point in its history. If the codes are the locus of the problems that every director has to resolve (how to frame? how to organize a sequence of images? how to link up moving images?), there are indeed many ways to answer these questions. The subcodes are specifying "the same coding problem."[12] For example, the issue of montage leads to different answers depending on the period, the author, aesthetic currents, and genres: montage of attractions (Eisenstein), invisible montage, montage-collage, "forbidden" montage (Bazin), and so on. The notion of the subcode is without doubt pragmatic.

---

[9] Christian Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, (2016) [1991]), p. 20.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Christian Metz, *Essais sémiotiques* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977a), p. 118.

More generally, for Metz, "linguistic-analytical capture" is "from the start a socio-historical project."[13] In *The Perceived and the Named*,[14] he shows that "the perceptual object" is a "socially constructed" entity. The transition to the psychoanalytic approach (1975) becomes part of the same movement by integrating the unconscious determinations into the process of reading movies and into the construction of the cinematic signifier itself. Metz points out in closing that the way he has described how the cinematographic signifier works "concerns…only certain geographical forms of the institution itself – those used in Western countries." And he adds: "The entire film as a social fact, and thus also the psychological state of the ordinary viewer, may entail aspects that are very different to those we are used to. Only one ethnography of the filmic state has been attempted, among others that have yet to be tried."[15] The contextual, pragmatic approach is not even absent from *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (2016 [1991]). Metz points out several changes in the way the configurations he studies work, depending on the communicative contexts they are operating in. He observes, for instance, that the gaze of the camera "was capable of taking forms one would not think of." The viewer of primitive cinema would see it as something normal, because at that time "it is a set-up [*dispositif*] that differs profoundly from what prevails today."[16]

---

[12] Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema* (The Hauge, Paris: Mouton & Co., 1971b), p. 193.

[13] Metz, *Essais sémiotiques*, p. 186.

[14] Ibid., pp. 127–161.

[15] Ibid., pp. 132–133.

[16] Christian Metz, *L'énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991), p. 41.

In short, the analyses Metz offers are based on the conviction that external constraints determine the cinema's *conditions of possibility*. Beyond its immanentist proclamations, we can say that the entire work of Metz reflects concerns from pragmatics.

Vacillation

Some works vacillate between the two paradigms. I will give just one example. Gianfranco Bettetini's 1984 book *La conversazione audiovisiva* invites us to look at conversational analysis, one of the major trends in linguistic pragmatics. Yet, from the beginning, Bettetini explains that the notion of conversation cannot have the same meaning in film as in linguistics: not only is film a mono-directional medium that does not allow an authentic exchange, but the film text itself cannot be modified during the conversation. There is thus no real interactivity. On the other hand, the audiovisual conversation in question takes place between two entities, both of which are identifiable through a set of marks inscribed in the text itself: the enunciator and the addressee. It is, in a word, a *conversazione testuale* (this is the title of Chapter 4).[17] At the same time, Bettetini recognizes that it is essential to step back from the text and to extend his investigations to concrete situations in which communication takes place. In this way, he begins a typology of the various constitutive instances of the empirical enunciating subject (*il soggetto empirico*) – instances that may speak in the communicative field: the editorial, the author, the major genres[18] and an analysis of the extratextual enunciative marks (paratexts, a TV schedule, indications about genre, and so on).[19] Two conceptions of enunciation are thus posited – one, textual (enunciation in the classic sense of the term, which falls under the category of immanence); the other, whose status is pragmatic, external.

At other times, Bettetini shows that the empirical viewer can be registered in the textual conversation only by putting themselves in the shoes of the subject of the enunciation that the text offers them, a symbolic subject who works as a "prosthesis"[20] on which the viewer must rely in order for

---

[17] Gianfranco Bettetini, *La conversazione audiovisiva. Problemi dell'enunciazione filmica e televisiva* (Milan: Bompiani, 1984), pp. 95–133.

[18] Ibid., p. 29.

[19] Ibid., p. 36.

[20] Ibid., p. 28.

Amsterdam University Press

the communication to work. Now, because the filmic text has a fixed and immutable structure that includes in its semiotic articulation "the representation of its standards of use and of the mode of access to its meaning,"[21] it is ultimately this text which, *through* the enunciative prosthesis, programmes the empirical viewer. Once again, the movement therefore goes from text to viewer. There is a return to immanence. But Bettetini also recognizes that the empirical spectator cannot content themselves with putting themselves in the shoes of the viewer produced by the text – that they are stuck between two projects: the project of the text and their own project, or at least the project that they define under the constraint of the external determinations that weigh on them. It may happen, then, that external, contextual determinations outweigh the textual determinations.

There is thus a constant back and forth going on in the book between the immanentist and the pragmatic paradigms. No one is more aware of these switches than Bettetini, who, in his presentation, talks about the "dialectical tension"[22] that is at the heart of his thinking. It is obvious that he wants to renounce neither the immanence that reassures him theoretically (it is immanence that, in his view, establishes semiotic relevance), nor the consideration of the pragmatic dimension that he strongly senses cannot be expunged without being cut off from the actual workings of communication.

For an Articulation between the Two Paradigms: Semio-Pragmatics

My view is that the difficulty theorists have in escaping immanence, such as Metz's position in extolling immanence while developing a pragmatic approach, or Bettetini's vacillation, should neither be condemned as inconsistent nor dismissed as signs of theoretical weakness, but, on the contrary, should be taken quite seriously as the mark of a very real phenomenon: what if neither paradigm could be escaped?

Everything happens as though both paradigms were still there, at the same time, present in theorists', but also in everyone's, minds: at the same time, there is the belief in the text and its independent existence, and the recognition that the meaning of a text changes with the context.

In *L'implicite* (1986), Catherine Kerbrat-Orrecchioni describes the existence of this dual belief with a bit of humour. She begins by quoting Bob Wilson,

---

[21] Ibid., p. 101.

[22] Ibid., p. 8.

Amsterdam University Press

who was interviewed about *Einstein on the Beach*: "I handle images as a composer would. You are free to interpret them as you like." But a little later on, in response to the question, "What does this building represent? Is it a school?", he protests, outraged. "What? No! Not at all!" And Catherine Kerbrat-Orrecchioni remarks: "Every one of us can give in to it one day. As semioticians, we are ready to allow the right, and even to claim it, to more than one reading of the same text; to repeat endlessly (because this truth is still a long way from being recognized by most people in the world of criticism, or among those who teach literature) that we must recognize the existence, at the heart of interpretive activity, of a principle of both uncertainty and diversity. But as soon as we take off our semiotician's hats and become ordinary consumers of literary or other texts, we fall right into the interpretive dogmatism we were excoriating a few moments earlier, stubbornly extolling the virtues of common sense and setting off on a crusade against misinterpretation: "I know very well, but all the same…."[23]

In *Le film sous influence, un procédé d'analyse*, Jean-Daniel Lafond reasons rigorously in the opposite direction, but ends up arriving at the same conclusion: he attributes to the viewer the idea of the individual reading – the idea that there are as many films as there are viewers – and to the semiologist the role of the one who restores the immanent truth of the text: "the analyst is going to…focus their work on reviewing the stimulus – in this case, on the film as an organised information system. The study of this structure is precisely what is involved in analysing a film. This approach therefore turns its back on the sense of 'the unique' that the viewer usually has of how they perceive the film, and that justifies the prejudice that says there are as many films as viewers."[24]

Whether it is the ordinary reader or the theorist who does or does not believe in the variability of the text, one thing is certain: the double movement is within us. On the one hand, it is impossible for us not to presuppose the existence of the text, namely immanence: without this belief, social life would be really very difficult. On the other hand, it is equally impossible for us not to recognize that, depending on the context in which it is carried out, the construction of the text may be different (the pragmatic approach).

It seems to me that the logical conclusion to draw from this finding is that these two paradigms must intervene in the analysis of communication and therefore in the theoretical framework that aims to take account of it. Nor can we fail to recognize that the text varies in accordance with the context, or overlook the fact that the receiver believes in the existence of a text that has been sent to them with a meaning that has been set in stone, and that they would simply have to decode. Whether it is or is not an illusion does not alter the fact that it is this text that, ultimately, *is* the result of the communication process. What is needed, then, is a theory capable of articulating these two contradictory movements at the heart of the communication process – a theory that connects the two paradigms.

---

[23] Catherine Kerbrat-Orechioni, *L'implicite* (Paris: A. Colin, 1986), p. 310.

[24] Jean-Daniel Lafond, *Le film sous influence, un procédé d'analyse* (Paris: Édilig, 1982) p. 70.

Even its name tells us that the semio-pragmatic approach aims to articulate these two paradigms. This approach does not make obsolete the immanentist approach of classic semiology, whose key contributions it recognizes: the attention paid to the text, the production of analytical tools (the typology of signs, certain conceptual pairings – denotation vs connotation, paradigmatic vs syntagmatic relations, and so forth), the structural analysis of the narrative and of the description, procedures for analysing the enunciative structure, acts of language, etc. – and even salutary warnings against the deviations that an uncontrolled pragmatic approach can lead to. Its goal is to put this immanentist approach *into a contextualized pragmatic perspective.* Once the contextual constraints governing the construction of the text have been recognized, the immanentist analysis can be put into action.

The Semio-Pragmatic Model

It now makes sense to create and construct a model of communication that will be adapted.

One caveat, however, about this term "model" is in order: I use it for convenience, and my constructions do not have the logical rigour that this notion normally implies. The quotes are there to indicate this reserve. Since putting them around every occurrence of the term would weigh the text down too much, I will ask the reader to include them in their mind every time they see the term. What I call a model is only a *working tool* that mediates between theory and observation – a theoretical device, a "machine,"[25] a kind of optical instrument, a telescope, or rather a microscope, that aims to *help the reader to see better* and *ask themselves questions*.

I am looking for a model that can account for the two contradictory movements that have been highlighted: on the one hand, there is the fact that we believe we are looking at a text that someone wanted to communicate to us and that we believe we can understand. On the other, there is the fact

---

[25] Metz, *Essais sémiotiques*, p. 185.

Amsterdam University Press

that different texts are produced depending on the reading context we are in. These two movements do not have the same relationship to the pragmatic paradigm: whereas the second is recorded directly, the first derives from the immanentist illusion – though it must be possible to explain this illusion starting from the pragmatic position.

It is clear that patterns of transmission of the encoding-decoding type (Shannon and Weaver, Jakobson) or so-called models in "Y" that are content to add a pragmatic component to the codic components (for example, the deictic component in Benveniste) would not suit this approach. Interactive models developed by Bateson, Goffman, Watzlawick and others are closer to what I am after. For these models, the "context," sometimes referred to as the "framework," or the "culture," is the determinant, an "element" in the sense in which we speak of air and water as elements, an enveloping element in which the actors of communication are bathed. The metaphor that has been developed is that of the "orchestra": "the members of a culture participate in communication just as musicians participate in an orchestra. But the communication orchestra has no boss, and the musicians are not playing from the same score. They come to more or less harmonious agreements because they will guide each other as they play."[26] Thus "each individual participates in communication rather than being its origin or its outcome."[27] However, the concept of communication has a specific meaning here. These models are, in fact, made for social communication: what happens *for the individual and between individuals* in the *hic et nunc*, with a focus that is often (though not always) therapeutic. In their current form, these models seem to me barely serviceable if one wishes, as I do, to study both mediated and deferred communication, bringing into play a film, a television show, a book, a journal article, and so on, as well as viewers or readers.

The model I suggest building posits a radical separation between the space of the sender (S) and that of the receiver (R): when, in the space of the sender (S), the sender gives birth to a text (T) in the space of reception, this text is reduced to a set of visual and/or sound *vibrations* (V) from which the receiver (R) will produce a text (T') that cannot, *a priori,* be identical to (T). We thus have a model of non-communication.

Note: This position does not contradict the statement by Paul Watzlawick (1972) that "one cannot not communicate." What the theorist from the

---

[26] Yves Winkin, *Anthropologie de la communication. De la théorie au terrain* (Bruxelles: De Boeck/ Paris: Seuil, 2001).

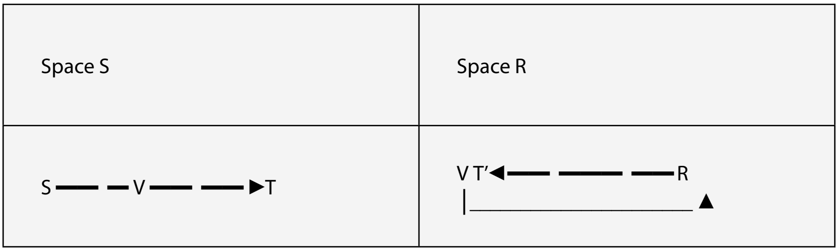
[27] Yves Winkin, *La nouvelle communication* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 25.

Amsterdam University Press

> Palo Alto school means is that we cannot not produce signals. This does not mean at all that these signals are interpreted correctly by those who perceive them.

Here is a first snippet of how the model is built:

Schema 1: Two spaces



In the space of the sender (S), (V) is located between (S) and (T): the work S does actually involves giving shape to vibrations in order to produce a text. When we enter the space of the receiver (R), this text is again reduced to vibrations (V), and it is these vibrations that (R) will in turn transform into text (T').

The status that I am assigning to this model is worth noting. The key point is that it in no way claims to *describe* how communication works: rather, it aims to make it possible to ask about how communication processes do or do not work. The semio-pragmatic model is *heuristic*: one does not try to determine whether a heuristic hypothesis is true or false. Rather, one adopts it only provisionally as a guiding idea as one looks for the facts. That is the status that is given to the hypotheses which (in)form semio-pragmatics.

The value of putting a *model of non-communication* at the starting point of our reflections is clear: because of its radical character, this model forces me to consider communication as a *problem* and not as something that exists. More precisely, the value of such a model is that it forces me to try to explain what can lead (S) and (R) to "communicate," i.e., to ask how the processes by which meaning is produced in both spaces can get so close to each other that (R) has the impression that (T) was *transported* from one space to the other. This constitutes an immanentist position: (R) "thinks" they have in front of them a text that (S) has communicated to them: first movement.

The model also allows us to ask about the second movement, namely the fact that different texts (T') can be built from the same (V). Indeed, if (R) is responsible for the construction of the text (T') in the space of reading, we can imagine that a receiver (R2) will lead to the construction of a text (T''), that (R3) will lead to (T’’’), and so on, and that there are as many texts that have been constructed as there are receivers.

But what is meant by receivers and, more generally, what is the status of the actors in communication?

I will consider (S) and (R) not as individuals, but as *actants*. Accepting the risks that come with abstraction and a deterministic vision – a purely theoretical determinism – I will define (S) and (R) *as the intersection of a set of constraints that passes through and constructs them*.

The same person can thus appear in the form of different (Rs) – (R1), (R2)…(Rn) – following the sets that cross them and produce different texts from the same (V): (T1), (T2)…(Tn).

Conversely, different people will be able to appear in the form of one and the same (R) and therefore produce the same (T) if they are traversed by the same set of constraints.

Finally, if we ask ourselves about the way in which the constraints are involved in each of the two spaces, we can then compare how (S) and (R) produce meaning based on the set of constraints that constitutes them. The more similar the set of constraints that weigh on (S) and (R), the more (S) and (R) will be constructed in a similar way, and the greater the chances that they will produce meaning in the same way and that what they produce will be similar to one another: (T’) becomes more like (T). In the end, communication can take place because the actants who are producers of meaning, (S) and (R), are not free. Specifically, it is these constraints, and they alone, that allow us to get the impression that the process of communication works.

Here we find the question of the “context,” seen not as what the referential process refers to (as, for example, in Jakobson’s model), *but as all of the constraints that govern the production of meaning* (*cf.* Schema 2 at the end of the Introduction).

In the same way that some theorists have proposed classifying narrative models into models of the finished story (Greimas) and models that follow the movement of the construction of the narrative by the reader (Bremond, Eco), communication patterns can be classified into:

- models that analyse communication that has finished, or models oriented around *results*, such as Jakobson’s model, which is focused on the message (these models derive from the immanentist paradigm)
- models that analyse communication as it unfolds, or models oriented around *progressions*[28]

---

[28] Cf. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1995).

The semio-pragmatic model falls under neither of these categories. It is concerned with the constraints that govern how the actants in communication are constructed, and with the way in which they are led to produce meaning: I propose to talk about a *production model*.

A production model describes the context as a construction that precedes communication, in order to set the terms on which it takes place: for instance, if I were to take the set of all theatres, I could construct the context as a space in which the actant (R) is positioned as a "viewer," as opposed to the academic context, where (R) is positioned as a "learner," or to the family context, in which they are positioned as a "member of the family." In progression models, by contrast, the context is constructed in the course of communication and works as a "variable": "A central problem for pragmatic theory is to describe how, for any given utterance, the hearer finds a context which enables him to understand it adequately."[29]

Here we are, then, facing two different conceptions of the notion of context – or, more exactly, two different notions of context. Sperber and Wilson offer a robust critique of the models that regard the context as a prior condition, but if we look carefully at their criticisms, we notice that what they see as falling under the notion of prior context has nothing to do with the conception of the context as it is found in semio-pragmatics: the prior context as they envisage it consists essentially of encyclopaedic content and of information stored in memory (they also speak of "common knowledge"); for the semio-pragmatic model, the context is constituted by the constraints. I think these two models complement one another: the production model sets the overall *framework* within which the progression model will operate.

Moreover, Sperber and Wilson acknowledge the existence of this framework, but only for very special cases such as the institution of the law, where "there really is a serious attempt to establish mutual knowledge among all the parties concerned: all laws and precedents are made public, all legitimate evidence is recorded, and only legitimate evidence can be considered, so that there is indeed a restricted domain of mutual knowledge on which all parties may call, and within which they must remain." But they go on: "There is no evidence of any such concern in normal conversation, however serious or formal it is."[30] We can see that Sperber and Wilson are right, of course, if we regard the prior context as content. But it is quite a different matter if we look at the constraints that govern the production of meaning.

---

[29] Ibid., p. 16.

[30] Ibid., p. 19.

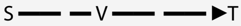
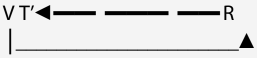
Amsterdam University Press

Communication takes place most frequently within institutional frameworks that are obviously just so many systems of constraints (family, school, university, the factory, and so on). Going to the theatre and the cinema, watching TV, going to a football or rugby game in a stadium, going into a supermarket, opening a newspaper, also involve entering into a system of constraints. Even spontaneous dialogues come into such frameworks, as has been shown by specialists in verbal interactions and conversational analysis. In addition, systems of constraints can readily be transported and internalized: when I ask my friend Pierre, whom I have just bumped into on a street corner, for news of his family, I am caught up in the constraints both of the family as an institution and of politeness. And as for romantic relationships....

In the semio-pragmatic model, analysis starts decidedly from the context – that is, from constraints. These constraints lead the actant (R) to produce *hypotheses of reading* that they will test out on (V): for example, if I am in a context that invites me to resort to fictionalization, I will try to construct the space as a “world,” but it may be that the system of vibrations to which I apply this process does not allow this.

Chapter 1 examines the status of natural, narrative language and other constraints, and suggests constructing the notion of a *space of communication* to escape the aporias in the notion of *context*. Chapter 2 postulates that, inside a *discursive space* (in this case, “Western” space), the actors put a shared *communicative competence* into action. This skill is designed as a reservoir of *modes of production of meanings and affects*, which can themselves be analysed as a combination of processes. By way of example, several modes are constructed. Chapter 3 offers a detailed analysis of two modes, the artistic and the aesthetic, and inquires into the relationship between modes and spaces of communication. Starting from the example of the communication of memory within the family as an institution, Chapter 4 shows how the notion of a space of communication can allow contextual analysis. Chapter 5 mobilizes the notion of a space of communication to allow an understanding of what a production becomes when it moves outside its original space. Finally, Chapter 6 examines the difference between traditional (immanentist) textual analysis and textual analysis within the semio-pragmatic perspective.

Schema 2: Context as a Set of Constraints

Space S	Space R
	
Context S Constraints a, b, c….n	Context R Constraints b, c, d, g,… n