JOHANNES EHRAT

CINEMA & SEMIOTIC

*Peirce and Film Aesthetics,
Narration, and Representation*

CINEMA AND SEMIOTIC:
PEIRCE AND FILM AESTHETICS, NARRATION,
AND REPRESENTATION

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Johannes Ehrat

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Saint Paul, je crois, disait que l'image aura sa plénitude dans la résurrection
Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in *Ishaghpou*r (1986), 297

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Acknowledgments

Cinematography (movement-writing) began as steganography (hidden writing on the wall of the Roman College). Athanasius Kircher, S.J., is credited with the invention of cinema as idea and as apparatus. He called it *steganographia catoptrica* (fol. 912) in his *Ars magna lucis et umbrae in decem libros digesta*, *quibus admirandae lucis et umbrae in mundo*, *atque adeo universa natura, vires effectusque uti nova, ita varia novorum reconditiorumque speciminum exhibitione, ad varios mortalium usus, panduntur*; only later it went by its hallmark *laterna magica*. This was in 1646. Fr Kircher was more interested in bringing the hidden truth to light (so much about the seminal 'cinematic apparatus') than in entertaining (even though his demonstrations of the *laterna magica* in the Roman College apparently were also major social events, of which he was perfectly aware when he wrote on the very same fol. 912: 'Notandum & hic literas singulas nescio quo occulto naturae pictricis artificio omni colorum genere depictas videri: quae res uti insolens est, ita & dici vix postest, quantam in spectatoribus admirationem suscitet').

It is my joy to continue humbly – in this same venerable Collegium Romanum (which became the Gregorian University) – the intellectual pursuit of the secrets of light and shadows (also *ad varios mortalium usus & a.m.D.g.*).

My own *admiratio* for cinema kept growing as a result of long study. The ground was laid in particular by a few teachers, to whom I remain grateful and indebted. Marc Gervais, S.J. (Loyola campus, Montreal), taught me everything about cinema and forced me to emphatically see and write (*sans* split infinitives, *clare et distincte*, in plain English) what cinematographic eyes see and not what mind speculates. I owe him all my love for cinema. Enrico Carontini (Université du Québec à Mont-

réal), in his spirited way, introduced me to the thought of C.S. Peirce. He opened for me a new intellectual horizon. Pierre Boudon (Université de Montréal), with rigour and method, introduced me to Aladdin's cave of semionarratology, the work of his teachers A.J. Greimas and Ch. Metz. I owe him Cartesian clarity and decisive encouragement in adversities. To them and all my Roman teachers my profound gratitude.

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My brother, sisters, and parents have always accompanied me; they alone know how much they deserve my gratitude.

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Introduction

εἰκὼν τοῦ ἀοράτου

(cf. Col 1,15)

This book is about film, not films. The business of film theory is theory, not the interpretation of films.[1] In principle, we must assume film to be a certain kind of meaning, a cognitive conduct. That is, film theory scrutinizes meaning as such, and does so in its cinematic specificity.

Philosophy reflects the possibility and the conditions of meaning and cognition as such. It also contributes to a better understanding of cinema – an understanding that is measured by philosophy's answers to crucial problems of cinematic meaning. One of the most difficult problems is art, including film art. Do aesthetic works cognize something, or do they express mere subjective feelings? The best works of art seem to be creative and to make visible the unimaginable. Thus film aesthetics, as a theory of an elusive object, avers itself to be the touchstone for adequate theorizing. Narration is the next crucial problem of film theory. It would be naive to assume that narratives describe facts. In fact, narration imitates action and provides intentions and future. One has to grasp the nature of time in order to understand how narration manipulates it. Is cinema capable of truth? We can understand this crucial problem only if we leave behind the simplicist, essentialist equation of the photographic image with mundane states of affairs before the lens.

Most film theories apply some sort of philosophical argument. Ours is Semiotic,[2] as far as it has a direct bearing on subjects of concrete cinematic meaning. In a debate with other philosophies of cinema (Deleuze, Cognitivism, semiology), the Semiotic solution I propose here

argues for new or different solutions to crucial problems of cinematic meaning.

Do we really need answers to fundamental problems of cinema?[3] Would it be better to confine meaningful theorization to specifics such as 'cinematic metaphors,' 'film-editing conventions according to epochs and national styles,' 'illusionism in cinema,' 'realist essence of cinema,' and so forth? Even assuming that answers to such specific questions are necessary, they are not solvable in themselves. Fundamentals are not optional. Every close examination of specific film problems reveals strong links of presupposition that answer, explicitly or not, crucial fundamental questions about meaning in cinema. The fact is that there is no methodology that is 'native' to film in the same sense that linguistics is native to language. Comprehension of film cannot thrive on borrowed means. Theory suffers when we adopt methods used for other objects on a metaphorical or analogical basis. This is because we constantly risk overstretching the principle of analogy, the metaphorical point of comparison between the two objects. Interpretations based on those analogies in fact jump to conclusions – sometimes even leap – and they cannot but falter once their metaphorical basis is shaken. The reason for this becomes apparent when we take into account what such methodologies postulate in terms of theory of reality. Methods must construct their object within their particular purview, and that purview alone gives being to those objects. For example, language is more than the object of linguistics; in linguistics, language exists in respect to its regular nature. All of this provides us with excellent reasons to investigate the foundations of film theory before that theory becomes a method. This investigation can only be philosophical.[4]

Where is the contribution of Peircean Semiotic? First and foremost, Semiotic does not fit squarely into the eternal canonical debates in film theory;[5] rather it relates to its major points of contention. Fundamentally, it responds to the three basic questions relating to major areas of film theoretical debate:

- *The Question of Truth*: Why and how can film represent objects of another universe? The entire 'realism' debate (Bazin, Pasolini, Eco) had shifted to a seemingly more technical level of cinematic codes of representation; there, it finds itself stuck in the interminable number of codes and in the hopeless complexity of any theoretical attempt to pass from codes to actually perceived meaning. Thus, the question

of cinematic representation can still be seen as open. Semiotic will be able to contribute a novel approach.

- *The Question of Narration*: Why and how can film represent time?[6] This second area, cinematic narration, is severed quite deliberately from the first. The two are often lumped together with the representation problem. Yet when we phrase the problem as one of time, we can see where the essential difference must lie, and also that dealing with it involves other theoretical concepts. Neoformalism and Metz's *grande syntagmatique* address this problem, but we must wonder whether they provide an adequate answer to this question: How does film construct narrative time? Again, Semiotic will contribute a novel approach.
- *The Question of Discovery*: Why and how can film induce, beyond representation, the aesthetic processes? Aesthetic is perhaps the most neglected area in film theory. It bespeaks a terminological deflation in this field when the title of Aumont's book promises 'L'esthétique du film,' yet between the covers there is no trace of it. 'Esthétique' is, as if it were a matter of course, translated into the more manageable problems of perception, narration, and code.

Peircean bits and pieces have found their way into various popular film books and into a number of footnotes in film theory books. Mostly, this involves discussions of signs, which are shrunk to sign divisions that do not measure up to classification in Peirce's sense. Generally neglected is his Pragmaticism and his aesthetic. Because this is – like Peircean scholarship in general – a rather new area of philosophical inquiry,[7] it has not yet born fruit for film aesthetics. Here, the absolute (albeit waning) domination of semiology in film studies ('semiotics') has perhaps contributed to the lamentable underestimation of a great thinker. Unfortunately for Peirce, he did not, like Hegel, enjoy the chance during his lifetime to present his thought in an organized fashion or to have his pupils do so. So it should not surprise us that there is no Peircean Ästhetik. Yet Peirce's thought is sufficiently architectonic to allow a faithful concept of his aesthetics as a philosophical science of norms.

The *pointe* of a Semiotic sign theory – even with Peirce's rudimentary reputation in film theory – is far from evident. In some central points, Semiotic contradicts semiology; furthermore, its explanatory power is not limited to conventional signs, or codes. A Semiotic sign theory might at first glance seem quite unintuitive, because its implicit point

of reference is not in language. Language – this is intuitive to every speaker. As relational achievements, however, signs are strictly logical and depend on tributary mathematical reasoning. This logic, however, is the logic of Signs, which are there only to be used and whose usage is the only means available to produce meaning in human behaviour (i.e., to control one's actions). Self-controlled behaviour has only one form, the Sign, which is a logical relationship and therefore must comprehend every meaningful action. Meaning can thus not be limited to actual action (or what now is speakable or 'languaged'); besides all existent past and present action, self-controlled behaviour must also comprehend all possible action. Here we are already beyond the realm of speech, because one can speak only what is conceived, or exists as *this* idea. This cannot, however, become the boundary of meaning, so there must be space for the conceivable. Self-controlled behaviour requires a further openness, which also transcends facts and the existing: one might see any number of facts, but not yet understand the one rule which unites them all into one law. There is no limit to cognition, and future cognition is not constrained by our present cognition.

All of this is contained in the Sign form. Signs are not 'just signs,' because everything is a Sign, otherwise it would not be: that is, either possible, or true, or necessary. As a consequence, it is extremely misleading to say, 'This is a sign,' because we would then have to be able to say, 'This is not a sign,' which is wrong. In fact, negation is a relation of existence, and therefore a Sign. An existential relation to objects is just one of three dimensions needed in every sign relation. Semiotic therefore can claim reasonably to be non-reductionist but to grasp all 'phenomena,' or world in its givenness. Whatever there is (for us) is Sign. Other sign theories are limited to language and convention and must explain everything as a function of language.[8] In this study I will attempt, then, to let Semiotic bear its fruit.

One fruit of the Semiotic of truth is a new perspective on representation. The heading chosen for this topic is 'the cinematic object'[9] in the very literal sense of *ob-jectum*, the vis-à-vis of film: How does cinema capture its other? In this way, we do not narrow the question to how cinema produces an illusion. Representation of the other – the entire gamut, including illusion – is one of the fundamental functions of cinema, and every theory of film must arrive at its own answer explaining how this happens. Our Semiotic theory, by making use of the triadic Sign relation, should be capable of grasping the widest possible spectrum of 'objectification.'

Cinema is often equated with narration (it is 'bolted to its body,' as Metz says). In this study I will make a distinction between representing something and narrating something. Narration, of course, makes use of representations, but its point is a completely different one: time. Narratives, with the aid of an appropriate enunciation, give a probabilistic form to time. There is evidently a profound problem in this transformation, since narrative time is not its own source. The source of time, including all further transformations (and narration is merely one of them), is Continuity, which is cognized as an Iconic Sign. Such a theory of time will be able to overcome the traditional split in time theories between physical and psychological time. The idea of Continuity is in itself a difficult one to grasp, but it must be distinguished from time as experienced in an existential now – for instance, in narrating.

It is much more difficult to provide a non-technical general idea of aesthetic. On the premise that it is cognition and, therefore, that it has 'practical consequences,' aesthetic as cognitive conduct has the specific task of relating to normativity. Contrary to certain sociological tenets (Weber, Habermas, the 'Critical' tradition), a norm is not a 'rationality.' Rational behaviour is possible only when one is already in possession of the norm. A norm's invention or constant reinvention is, however, a matter of Iconic Feelings. Norms as feelings are neither experience nor cognition, but they are necessary, as various types of pragmatic guidance, for various types of cognition. The indirect grasp of norms poses a challenge to Semiotic processes connected with it, as well as to aesthetic enunciations aiming at it. We will find that this delicate process of aesthetic cognitive conduct involving non-cognition leads to a specifically cinematic aesthetic,[10] just as there is a specific musical aesthetic. Although it becomes extremely difficult to assign a valid interpretation to an aesthetic sign, in theory such a sign's mode of operation is perfectly clear. However, this is not a licence for arbitrariness.

The result of this Semiotic approach to cinema is a three-part thematic division. First I will prepare the ground with a Semiotic theory of meanings and realities. Then I will consider the cinematic object (representation and truth values), cinematic narration (time production), and cinematic aesthetic (perception). Finally I will consider comprehensively the cinematic production of the different meanings (enunciation). While adhering to a strictly theoretical purview, I will be integrating some film analysis or Interpretation. These integrations, however, will be restricted to the Semiotic dimension concerned.

1 On Signs, Categories, and Reality and How They Relate to Cinema

Peirce in film theory: he is seldom fully integrated, but even when rejected, he seems to be generally known about. Judging from the cursory remarks scattered in film literature, he would have felt misunderstood. Sometimes this misunderstanding has an actual genealogy, one that reflects an interpretation of an (imaginative: Deleuze) interpretation of an (early systematizing: Deledalle) interpretation of Peirce; and Deledalle considers only sign theory. Small wonder that Peirce's signs have become a 'regression à l'infini'[1] and a 'quadrillage universel monté ... autour de la représentation.' Another voice, Peter Wollen's Peircean classification of films through the use of one of the sign trichotomies, has remained largely inconsequential. Only in Deleuze has Peirce found a more conspicuous place in film theory. Deleuze's is among the more fascinating efforts to apply Peirce to the fundamentals of film theory; that said, Deleuze would not have been himself had he not used Peirce in a highly creative and idiosyncratic way. It is fair to assume that Deleuze had his own theory in mind, for which he also found some use for bits and pieces of Peirce's sign classification.

Those in film theory with an antisemiotic attitude – and there are quite a number – most often are actually rejecting semiology and what was developed at the École des Hautes Études and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. Sometimes, Peirce is the baby thrown out with the bathwater of film semiology (aka 'film semiotics'). It is not difficult to show that Peirce plays no part in the logomachy of codes and code systems often improperly identified with semiotics. It is indeed difficult to grasp Peirce if one does not begin with the cornerstone of his thought: his theory of Categories. Peirce's Categories are – deliberately – so abstract that they are often seen as superfluous as well as worthless

for film analysis. Yet it is the attempts to bend Peirce to the forms of Saussure's binary arbitrary sign concept that effectively destroy Peirce's usefulness. For Ropars, the 'vertigo of the circle of the system's circulation' a result of Peirce's 'tout est signe.' One could concur easily if signs were Saussurean place values. Yet with regard to Peirce, is there a better way to express a disregard of the logical as well as the metaphysical implications of our categorical way of 'possessing' being?

It seems quite obvious that Peirce is still not being heeded enough in film theory. I admit from the outset that he provides no easily applicable theoretical concepts. His system's architecture is highly complex, and we must consider it carefully and in its entirety if we are to draw useful and meaningful results from it. It has never been and never will be easy to comprehend Peirce. He did not make his system easy to access, and he rarely had an occasion to present his semiotic in a comprehensive way. He had no pupils – only a number of followers who used his heritage for their own purposes.

Owing to the deplorable personal and scholarly fate of Peirce, there have been a number of divergent interpretations of him; his adoption is continuing to evolve. This is quite usual with every great philosopher. William James 'abducted' pragmatism during Peirce's own lifetime. Peirce's early posthumous defenders included Dewey, who inspired Mead. Through Dewey and the Chicago School, Peirce still has a subliminal influence. He was last rediscovered back in the 1950s by Goudge, at which point it became undisputable that he was an important thinker in his own right and not merely the forerunner of pragmatism and Morris. The dispute at the time revolved around whether he was or was not a systematic thinker. His recent fame as a 'proto-semiologist' may, however, be based on a thorough misunderstanding, one that arose when Roman Jakobson was introduced to Peirce by Morris (cf. Liszka 1981; Portis-Winner 1994).

A serious rethinking of Peirce started with Max Fisch and Murray Murphey. To Murphey (1961) we must credit the first genetic view of Peirce's intellectual development. He understood clearly the crucial importance of Peirce's early metaphysics before the New List of Categories appeared in 1867. Also, he was among the first to appreciate how theories of mathematical continuity contributed to Peirce's later evolutionary metaphysics. However, Murphey was criticized for his negative judgment as to how accurately Peirce had understood Kant's *Critique*. From this perspective, Peirce supposedly left four contradictory architectonic systems, and failed because the 'master key' to his