Gilles Deleuze's theories of film have long held a strange position within the fields of film studies and philosophy: While rather ideosyncratic, Deleuze's theories are often ignored due to the very breadth of his project -- including both his own criticism and his collaborations with Felix Guattari. Similarly, Christian Metz, drawing even more strictly from linguistics in his analysis of film, has inhabited a nebulous position. Bringing these two theorists together through an analysis of Deleuze's appropriation (and dismissal) of Metz, Roger Dawkins redefines the project of film theory, situating it with a foundation in Deleuze's clarification of language in the cinema.

Making Sense of Matter in Deleuze's Conception of Cinema Language

Roger Dawkins

<1> Writing in the 1960s and early 1970s, Christian Metz's work on the cinema favoured systematic exactitude, and was concerned with uprooting film theory from what he saw as the "generalized" approach of the early twentieth century (Andrews 213). Metz thought that a more scientific approach to the cinema was to be found with the question of *language*, and although this question was metaphorically present since the 1920s [1], Metz was the first to apply modern linguistic models to this problem (Guzzetti 292). What resulted was a methodology of analysis based on the formalism inherent to Ferdinand de Saussure's and Louis Hjelmslev's linguistics. This meant that Metz determined cinema as a "textual system," with the image wholly subordinate to an external structure for its meaningful articulation.

<2> For Gilles Deleuze though, writing at the tail end of structuralism in the mid-1980s, such an emphasis on this kind of formalism drastically reduces the creative potential of the image. His idea of language is aligned with the poststructuralist debates of the late 1970s, debates that claimed the notion of the "totalizing system" in structuralism to be fundamentally limiting to the possibility of thought (Thomas 67) [2]. Approaching the cinema from a philosophical background (which caused quite a stir) [3], Deleuze contends the presupposition of formalism by claiming a prelinguistic dimension of the image as the locus of language and meaningful articulations. Whereas proponents of structuralism acknowledge a prelinguistic dimension that presupposes structure, Deleuze rethinks the prelinguistic, suggesting it as the matter from which language is a *product*, thereby opening up the potential of language beyond the reflection of preconceived form.

<3> Since this conception of the prelinguistic is largely a philosophical stance, Deleuze's application of this thesis to the problem of language in the cinema suggests a return to the kind of philosophical speculation Metz was trying to avoid. However, although they are different projects, the intersection of both, as marked by Deleuze's critique of Metz in the cinema books, nevertheless is important in problematizing what the question of language in the cinema might involve and what this question may entail.

<4> The aim of this paper is to consider the importance of a prelinguistic stage in the idea of language Deleuze outlines in his cinema books. More specifically, this concern with the prelinguistic lies with its significance in enlightening Deleuze's (brief) criticism of Metz's "language" of the cinema. In this respect, what will become clear is that the "root" of Deleuze's "difficulty" lies with Metz's conception of the prelinguistic, a conception that stems largely from the structuralist perspective of his work.

<5> As a way of addressing such questions this paper will be organized as follows. In the first part, the prelinguistic will be posited as the principle of Deleuze's notion of cinematic language. Then, in the paper's second part, the prelinguistic will be considered specifically in relation to Metz and a problematization of the structural methodology he appropriates. However something which is beyond the scope of the present

context is the unravelling of *how* Deleuze implements his perspective on the prelinguistic by way of the signs he formulates in the cinema books. This is a task underlying his entire cinematic project, and so this paper will content itself simply with identifying this principle as its stands in relation to both Metz and Deleuze.

The Language of the Cinema

<6> To begin with the question of the prelinguistic, a good starting point is what it might involve. Gary Genosko writes that in Felix Guattari's work on language, Guattari develops an idea of the prelinguistic from his interpretation of Hjelmslev's semiotic. In his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (originally published as *Omkring Sprogteoriens Grundlæggelse* in 1941), Hjelmslev describes language as based on a "sign-function" that forms matter into substance according to a matter-form-substance relation on a plane of expression and a plane of content. For instance *matter* would be a sound and thought element, *form* would be a language's rules of organization, and *substance* would be the product of matter and form. Bearing this in mind, Genosko writes that with Guattari's interpretation of the sign-function, matter is considered independently from its formation as substance. Referring to the nature of matter's reality, Genosko notes that Guattari is happy to label it a "matter-sense" in response (181).

<7> In Guattari's conception, considering the prelinguistic means reversing the matter-form-substance relation. This is a reversal which refutes the priority of form and emphasizes a conception of the prelinguistic anterior by right to its formation as substance. Moreover this draws our attention to two notions of the prelinguistic: first, the prelinguistic simply as matter prior to language (i.e. to its formation as substance); and second, Guattari's notion of the prelinguistic as that which is not only before language, but that which is necessarily independent of language too (matter-sense).

<8> If we turn to Guattari's collaborations with Deleuze, we can note a further suggestion of the prelinguistic. For example in *A Thousand Plateaus* (c1980, 1987) they describe a similar sense of matter with the "plane of consistency." The plane of consistency operates beneath formalized contents (or "strata") as the dimension from which the regimes of signs constitutive of stratification are formed. Deleuze and Guattari describe the plane of consistency in the following way: "The most disparate of things and signs move upon it: a semiotic fragment rubs shoulders with a chemical interaction, an electron crashes into a language, a black hole captures a genetic message, a crystallization produces a passion..." (69).

<9> Also, we note the development of two determining principles of the prelinguistic. First, the prelinguistic matter is not amorphous: "The plane of consistency...is in no way an undifferentiated aggregate of unformed matters, but neither is it a chaos of formed matters of every kind" (70). The second principle suggested by Deleuze and Guattari is that the prelinguistic is neither amorphous nor signifying. What is left with these two principles is a thesis of the prelinguistic according to which it is relative, *by right*, to nothing: "There is no 'like' here, we are not saying 'like an electron,' 'like an interaction' etc. The plane of consistency is the abolition of all metaphor; all that consists is Real" (69).

<10> The claim in this paper is that in Deleuze's work on the cinema, there is the same principle of matter-sense underlying his taxonomy of images and signs. For instance in the chapter "Recapitulation of Images and Signs," Deleuze suggests a notion of language as the product of the movement-image and its relations. Therefore it follows that the *sign*, as a formalization of expression, or "a feature of expression" (*Time* 33) that comes to represent "a type of image" (*Movement* 69), is always a product of the movement-image's relations. To put this another way would be to say that an *idea* of the sign never precedes the relation of terms constitutive of that sign, and rather than having a representative or reflective function, the sign is more the *presentation* of a specific aspect of the movement-image as matter-sense.

<11> However there is more to the prelinguistic in the cinema than the idea of matter prior to its formation as substance. The prelinguistic is also anterior by right to form, and in this respect the above principles I outlined from *A Thousand Plateaus* are wholly necessary to its nature. In the first case, the prelinguistic dimension of movement-images, like the plane of consistency, is non-amorphous (29). In order to maintain an independence from form, the prelinguistic cannot be amorphous, because if the relation of movement-images constituted a chaotic or undifferentiated mass, then it would be entirely necessary for an external structure to be present in order to form this "blob" into meaningful articulations.

<12> The second principle of the prelinguistic is that it is "a-syntaxic and a-signifying" for the same reason it is not amorphous (29). Therefore when Deleuze describes the prelinguistic movement-image in the cinema books as a "signaletic material" which "includes all kinds of modulation features, sensory (visual and sound), kinetic, intensive, affective, rhythmic, tonal and even verbal (oral and written)" (29), it is important to note the above qualification of this material also. For if the prelinguistic is not a-signifying and a-syntaxic, then it would be an assemblage of *possible* significations. If the significations of a language were present in its prelinguistic matter as *possibles*, then implied is a formal structure in relation to which these significations are possibilities, in turn meaning that the expression of matter is more the *realization* of something external to its nature [4].

<13> Both principles stem from a criticism at the heart of Deleuze's philosophy, a criticism steadfast against the presupposition of transcendent structure. In this conception of language, a transcendent structure limits the expression of the prelinguistic to the reflection of form. The reflection of form is the suppression of creativity, and for Deleuze this is a benign activity in any question of language (or philosophy) [5].

<14> What we are left with then are two notions of the prelinguistic. The first is the prelinguistic as an amorphous and syntaxic matter, according to which a conception of language is based on the formation of this matter into substance. The second is a more positive notion of the prelinguistic as the matter-sense from which signs are a product. In this respect the prelinguistic is not a reflection of some ratified form, and thus there is more scope for creative expression. For this to be the case the prelinguistic involves two principles: it is non-amorphous, but at the same time it is a-syntaxic and a-signifying. The prelinguistic in this second sense is the matter-sense of language, a matter-sense which proceeds not towards some preestablished expression, but towards the truth of an expression which is established at the same time.

Crises of Matter

<15> The problem of this paper is the following: how does the prelinguistic illuminate the relation between Deleuze and Metz in the cinema books? We can begin to see an answer if we turn to Deleuze's discussion of *fact* and *principle* in *The Time-Image* (1989). For instance Deleuze writes that the fact of the image lies with its historical constitution as "narrative utterance" -- in other words according to the form implied by external narrative structures. On the point of the widespread acceptance of narrative as the dominant mode of cinematic language, Deleuze and Metz are in agreement. They differ however because Deleuze accuses Metz of losing sight of this narrative fact, therefore confusing fact and principle. I described above the principle of the image as non-amorphous yet a-syntaxic, and so with the confusion of fact and principle Deleuze sees Metz to be asserting the primacy of form at the expense of the prelinguistic matter-sense.

<16> To approach this problem we must look into the narrative model in order to see how it bears on the prelinguistic in the cinema. In this respect the following passage is useful in its capacity as a kind of summary criticism of the methodology behind Metz's emphasis on narrative. Addressing the philosophical framework of Metz's approach to be fundamentally Saussurean, Deleuze writes that Metz "applies certain determinations

which do not belong exclusively to the language system [*langue*], but condition the utterances of a language [*langage*], even if this language is not verbal and operates independently of a language system" (25). If we look at the relation between narrative and linguistics in terms of *langue* and *langage* we will see how Metz overlooks the principle of the image. Moreover we will see this confusion as a structuralist dilemma in Metz's work that takes into account Hjelmslev's ideas also. Such a structural perspective implies, most importantly, a conception of the prelinguistic that Metz also adopts, and it is this structuralist perspective on the prelinguistic that is at the root of Deleuze's criticism of Metz.

<17> First of all, what of the relationship between Saussure and Metz? Saussure began developing his conception of linguistics in 1916, which involved the division of natural language into a finite amount of minimum units (phonemes) and an infinite number of compound articulations (monemes, phrases and sentences). These articulations were based on certain rules or conventions, and the totality of these rules at any given moment in history was what Saussure called "langue." Based on the fact that language construes meaning according to the double movement described above, from Andre Martinet we can also suggest this procedure of langue as a "double articulation" [6]. With this conception of language, the object (or "referent") is most importantly "bracketed" since linguistics constructs the object of study based on the system of langue. Signification is therefore arbitrary, and important is not the sense of language's relation to its object, but the formalism according to which thought and meaning is construed. It was in the face of the widespread acceptance of Saussurean linguistics as a methodological approach to contemporary theory that Metz attempted to legitimise the study of the cinema, thereby elevating its status to the level of academic discipline.

<18> With Saussure's method in mind, Metz's early writing was concerned with this question of langue in the cinema. Yet his project was frustrated when he claimed the basic unit of the cinema to be the image's signification as a "complete segment of reality" (*Film Language* 115). For instance consider his famous example: "A close-up of a revolver...signifies 'Here is a revolver!'" (67). Implied therefore were the following consequences: first, as a "complete signification," Metz claimed an absence of "discreet elements" (like the linguistic phoneme or seme), and this was unlike langue; and second, signification in the cinema is anything but arbitrary (unlike langue also): from the above example we can see how it was highly *motivated* for Metz. Therefore Metz's initial assertion regarding the idea of langue was that there is nothing resembling double articulation, and signification is motivated (114).

<19> However Metz soon developed his thesis, shrinking the prior distance between cinema and langue. For instance he later claims a sense of cinematic articulation, stating this to be evident in the realisation of narrative through the cinema's formal elements. These formal elements include, for example, editing, lighting, camera angles and *mise-en-scene*. He later reconsidered his rejection of arbitrariness, claiming a sense of the arbitrary with the narrative determination of the cinema and the conventions of editing (Buckland 210).

<20> Therefore, although not being *specifically* the same, we can see Metz asserting a notion of langue with the formal elements associated with narrative. Moreover he narrowed this gap further by claiming a version of langue's syntagmatic and paradigmatic in the operation of cinematic narrative. Deleuze notes the significance of this move in *The Time-Image*:

> [L]anguage features which necessarily apply to utterances will be found in the cinema, as rules of use, in the language system and outside of it: the syntagm (conjunction of present relative units) and the paradigm (disjunction of present units with comparable absent units). The semiology of the cinema will be the discipline that applies linguistic model, especially syntagmatic ones, to images as constituting one of their principle "codes" (25-26).

<21> What does this idea of the syntagmatic involve? For Saussure, syntagms are a "horizontal" dimension of language, and are the regular and typical patterns of *structure* in the language system. As such, the syntagmatic is like the actualisation of langue, which up until now was more of what Paul Thibault describes as a "virtual" dimension. Langue is a "whole" then, and "has value" only by virtue of the syntagmatic -- in other words, by virtue of "the relations among the parts which comprise the whole" (261). Although the absence of discrete elements complicates things slightly in the cinema, Metz nevertheless asserted the syntagmatic at the level of the *sequence*. He claimed that all films partake to some extent of eight principal syntagmatic "types" [7].Furthermore, non-narrative (or "modern" cinema) is simply a disturbance of the above syntagmatic grammar [8].

<22> The paradigmatic on the other hand is the "vertical" dimension of a signification's "associated relations" in linguistics. Thibault writes that this dimension contains all the combinations possible in a given "syntagmatic solidarity" [9]. Important though is that the paradigmatic only eventuates based on the completed signification of a syntagm, and so meaning is construed as a result of a signification's opposition to other possible significations in the paradigmatic. At the level of the word, opposition occurs in the paradigmatic dimension of a word's minimal units, yet in the face of its completed signification.

<23> For Metz a linguistic sense of the paradigmatic -- whereby present units are clarified by absent units -- is difficult because the paradigmatic dimension of an image is infinite in possibility. Therefore, although initially *like* linguistics, since "The filmic shot is...the result of the ordering of several elements (for example, the different visual elements in the image -- what is sometimes called the *interior montage*)" (116), the cinema is unlike langue because "these elements are indefinite in number and undefined in nature" (116). However this does not completely rule out the possibility of the paradigmatic, and we see this at the level of the oppositions of Metz's eight syntagmatic types [10]. More specifically also, since these syntagmatic types are determined at the level of the image's relation, the paradigmatic really begins with the type of cut or edit, and the spatio-temporal relations between images [11].

<24> To sum up the problem of Saussurean linguistics in the cinema, we can suggest a sense of langue for Metz according to the above syntagmatic and paradigmatic operations of narrative. In his quest to find an equivalent to langue, Metz settled on narrative because of its capacity to function as the same kind of formal condition. Cinema therefore is like a language system without double articulation and the arbitrary motivation of its terms, and it is nevertheless linguistic since formalism is primary. This is the sense of language Deleuze is addressing when he notes Metz's project to involve "certain determinations which do not belong exclusively to the language system [*langue*], but condition the utterances of a language [*langage*]."

<25> At the same time though, it seems that what is really going on in Metz's approach to cinematic language is an emphasis on the notion of "systematic theory" seminal in Saussure's linguistics (Weber 914). Saussure's aim was to establish linguistics as an authentic and rigorous science, and necessarily involved was the establishment of a true and unique "object" of study. However natural language, being such a heterogeneous mass of "the physical, physiological and psychical domains" (916), eludes such a determination, and it was for this reason Saussure focused on langue as the most appropriate "object" of analysis. Samuel Weber describes the fecundity of such an approach as apparent in the following tenets of structuralism some years later:

    i) the rejection of mere empirical observation or data as inadequate in
    establishing the object and method of science; ii) the tendency to construe
    science as a mode of description and of classification, as a taxonomy
    involving a semiotic system conceived as a closed, homogenous and discreet
    medium; iii) the conviction that the laws which govern the functioning of the
    sign system are independent both of the individual subjects participating in

it and of the specific material embodiment of the sign; and finally, iv) the
assertion that the object of semiotics is dependent upon a prior point of
view, involving a certain conception of structure of science and its object
(917).

What each of these tenets point towards is an emphasis on the point of view as
inaugural and wholly constitutive of the object, and with this in mind the question of
narrative in the cinema is a translation of structuralism's emphasis on the systematic.

<26> In respect of structure, it was suggested at the beginning of this paper that
Hjelmslev's approach to language could be interpreted from a similarly systematic point
of view. In his *Prolegomena* the formation of matter into substance according to the
"mutual solidarity" of the planes of content and expression is commonly thought to be a
"generalizing" of Saussure's signifier-signified relationship (Buckland 205). As I
noted earlier, the most traditional interpretation of language in Hjelmslev's account
is the following: it is a *system* that rests on the principle of an amorphous thought
and sound element ("*purport*"), shaped by a concrete and formal structure ("*sign-
function*") (Hjelmslev 55). Distinguishing his approach from "philosophical"
"speculation," Hjelmslev (like Saussure) claims an analysis of the formal system of
language to be most rigorous (6-7). Such an approach transcends "mere primitive
description" in favour of "a systematic, exact, and generalizing science" with which
"all events (possible combinations of elements) are foreseen" and "the conditions for
their realization established" (9).

<27> Warren Buckland notes also the importance of Hjelmslev's account of structure in
Metz's approach to the problem of language in the cinema. He describes the following
two principles as significant in the development of Metz's project: 1) The capacity of
Hjelmslev's system to function as a "generalization" of Saussure's signifier-signified
relation: Hjelmslev's linguistic analysis is significant because it "does not stop at
entities whose content and expression are correlated" (205); 2) In terms of its
relation to the history of semiology, Hjelmslev's work "developed a deductive procedure
designed to analyse *all* communication activity, which were defined as semiotic if they
could be organised into an expression plane and a content plane, each analysable into
form, material and substance" (206). In *Language and Cinema* (19??) Metz acknowledges
this relationship, noting his interpretation of *substance* as "the meeting of form and
material...it is...that which appears when a form happens to organise a material" (209-
210).

<28> Each of these ideas constitutes an overarching systematic point of view in Metz's
approach to the cinema whereby form is wholly required for meaningful articulation.
Such is a *presupposition* of formalism according to which narrative is only one specific
manifestation of systematic theory. As an example, consider the period of *Language and
Cinema* and Metz's revision of his earlier work in the collection *Essais sur la
signification au cinema I* (1971). In the original essay "Le Cinema: Langue ou Langage?"
(1964), Metz claims the image reflects a basic notion of reality according to Mikel
Dufrenne's thesis of "natural" signification -- in other words, "when a signification
is somehow immanent to a thing" (78). In the footnotes appended to his later revisions
in *Essais*, Metz changes tact slightly, claiming that an image's so-called natural
signification really only marks the subject's invisible "assimilation" of a cultural
code (78). In the first instance signification is a given and the identity of the code
is presupposed, while in the second instance the transcendent ideology is simply more
explicit in its capacity as *cultural* ideology. In both what is primary and what is most
important is the ideology actualised by the object, and we can say that both suggest
the object as an example of matter that cannot be considered independently of form
[12].

<29> In all of this, a structuralist position boils down to the presupposition of form
(as a transcendent point of view) in the matter-form-substance relation with which I
began this paper. Therefore the root of Deleuze's difficulty with Metz lies with his
structuralist point of view on the prelinguistic, since in contrast, matter for Deleuze

and Guattari most importantly can be considered *independently* of form: it is *matter-sense*. With the matter-sense of the prelinguistic, terms in language are not limited to the reflection of form, and in the cinema images need not be reduced to the representation of narrative codes. Instead, "They are the object of a perpetual reorganization" (*Time* 265).

Final Words

<30> As a way of concluding, consider the following footnote and how the question of matter is most revealing in Deleuze's dismissal of Metz:

> The linguist Hjelmslev calls "content" [matter] precisely this element which is not linguistically formed although it is perfectly formed from other points of view. He says "not semiotically formed" because he identifies the semiotic function with the linguistic one. This is why Metz tends to exclude this material in his interpretation of Hjelmslev (*Time* 287 *note 9*).

Codes are not an evident given in matter, and therefore matter can be considered independently of the linguistic function. In other words matter is "perfectly formed from other points of view": it is a "signaletic material" as Deleuze emphasizes earlier in "Recapitulation of images and signs" (29). As I have said, and Deleuze makes this perfectly clear, Metz's error lies with the fact that his interpretation overlooks the independence of matter, *excluding* matter-sense, and this stems directly from his emphasis on codes like narrative.

<31> Narrative was Metz's answer to the problem of langue, and in its capacity as formal code, narrative was simply another instance of a structural point of view that favours form over matter. Therein lies the root of Deleuze's difficulty with Metz, a difficulty that begins with narrative and takes into account the entire structural project. What I have tried to show in this paper is that the principle underlying Deleuze's concept of language in the cinema is based on the conception of the prelinguistic as matter-sense, a prelinguistic dimension that is anterior by right to its formation as substance.

Notes

[1] Stam et. al. cites the metaphorical application of "language" to the cinema in the 1920s by Riccioto Canuda, Louis Delluc, Vachel Lindsay and Bela Balazs among others (28). [^]

[2] In this respect see also *Cinethique*'s critique of Metz in *Screen* v. 14, n.1/2, pp. 189-214. [^]

[3] "In Anglo-American circles...interest in the two volumes was tempered by skepticism, not only about the source (a philosopher) but also about the sweep (roughly six hundred pages)...Because the cinema books are positioned in an immense oeuvre, part of 'une vie philosophique', they discourage reflection in toto..." (Flaxman 2). [^]

[4] See Deleuze, *Difference* (211ff.) for a more detailed explanation of the concept of the possible. [^]

[5] Paul Patton gives a useful summary of reflective/representational thought and non-representational/dynamic/creative thought in "Anti-Platonism and Art" (144-145). [^]

[6] According to Pasolini, Martinet "represents the final and defining movement of Saussurean linguistics" (Pasolini 202). Buckland describes this process as follows: "Verbal language is posited by Martinet to be organised on two levels: the first (the higher) level is analysable into meaningful units (morphemes) which are signs...; and a second, lower level, consisting of non-meaningful units" (206). See A. Martinet, *Elements of General Linguistics*. Trans. Elizabeth Palmer. London: Faber and Faber,

1964. [^]

[7] See *Film Language* (124-126). [^]

[8] Deleuze: "Christian Metz has no insurmountable difficulty in accounting for the deliberate disturbances of narration in modern cinema: it is enough to point to changes of structure in the syntagmatics" (Time 26). See also Deleuze's footnote on this point (285 *note 3*). For examples from Metz, see "The Modern Cinema and Narrativity" in *Film Language* (185-228). [^]

[9] See for example Thibault chapter 11, "Dimensions of Contextualization: The Mechanism of Langue" (257-303). [^]

[10] "[I]t should be remarked that the existence of several types of image-ordering has the effect of creating… a specific paradigmatic category, which is constituted precisely by the total system of the different syntagmas" (*Film Language* 68 *note*). [^]

[11] Describing a certain "value" of the cut, Metz writes: "This is the case with the "fade-dissolve" duality within the framework of the "conjunction of two sequences": a simple commutation, which the users -- that is to say, the spectators -- perform spontaneously, makes it possible to isolate the corresponding significates: a spatiotemporal break with the establishing of an underlying link (dissolve), and a straightforward spatiotemporal break (fade)" (*Film Language* 99). [^]

[12] Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, Deleuze suggests that Metz's use of the psychoanalytic model in *The Imaginary Signifier* reveals a similar presupposition of form as the narrative/cultural model of *Film Language* and *Language and Cinema* (Time 285 *note 3*). [^]

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