The Semiology of the Cinema

In recent years a considerable degree of interest has developed in the semiotics of film, in the question of whether it is possible to dissolve cinema criticism into a special province of the general science of signs. It has become increasingly clear that traditional theories of film language and film grammar, which grew up spontaneously over the years, need to be re-examined and related to the established discipline of linguistics. If the concept of 'language' is to be used it must be used scientifically and not simply as a loose, though suggestive, metaphor. The debate which has arisen in France and Italy, round the work of Roland Barthes, Christian Metz, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Umberto Eco, points in this direction.

The main impulse behind the work of these critics and semioticians springs from Ferdinand de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics. After Saussure's death in 1913 his former pupils at the University of Geneva collected and collated his lecture outlines and their own notes and synthesised these into a systematic presentation, which was published in Geneva in 1915. In the Course Saussure predicted a new science, the science of semiotics:

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiotics (from Greek semiosis, 'sign'). Semiotics would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiotics: the laws discovered by semiotics will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts.

Saussure, who was impressed by the work of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) in sociology, emphasised that signs must be studied from a social viewpoint, that language is a social institution which shapes the individual will. The linguistic system — what might nowadays be called the code — pre-existed the individual act of speech; the message is a study of the system therefore had logical priority.

Saussure stressed that his first principle, the arbitrary nature of the sign. The signifier (the sound-image a-k-s or b-a-f, for example) has no natural connection with the signified (the concept 'ax'). To use Saussure's term, the sign is 'unmotivated'. Saussure was not certain what the full implications of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign were for semiotics.
When semiology becomes organized as a science, the question will arise whether or not it properly includes modes of expression based on complete natural signs, such as pantomime. Supposing the new science welcomes them, its main concern will still be the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign. In fact, every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behaviour or — what amounts to the same thing — on convention. Polite formulas, for instance, although often imbued with a certain natural expressiveness (as in the case of a Chinese who greets his emperor by bowing down to the ground nine times), are none the less fixed by rule; it is this rule and not the intrinsic value of the gestures that obliges one to use them. Signs that are wholly arbitrary realise better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic in this sense. Linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system.

Linguistics was to be both a special province of semiology and, at the same time, the master-pattern ("le patron général") for the various other provinces. All the provinces, however — or, at least, the central ones — were to have as their object systems "grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign". These systems, in the event, proved hard to find. Would-be semiologists found themselves limited to such micro-languages as the language of traffic signs, the language of fans, ships' signalling systems, the language of gesture among Trappist monks, various kinds of semaphore and so on. These micro-languages proved extremely restricted cases, capable of articulating a very sparse semantic range. Many of them were parasitic on verbal language proper. Roland Barthes, as a result of his researches into the language of costume, concluded that it was impossible to escape the pervasive presence of verbal language. Words enter into discourse of another order either to fix an ambiguous meaning, like a label or a title, or to contribute to the meaning that cannot otherwise be communicated. Words in the bubbles in a strip-cartoon; words either anchor meaning or convey it.

It is only in very rare cases that non-verbal systems can exist without auxiliary support from the verbal code. Even highly developed and intellectualised systems like painting and music constantly have recourse to words, particularly at a popular level: songs, cartoons, posters. Indeed, it would be possible to write the history of painting as a function of the shifting relation between words and images. One of the main achievements of the Renaissance was to banish words from the picture space. Yet words repeatedly forced themselves back; they reappear in the paintings of El Greco, for instance, in Dürrer, in Hogarth: one could give countless examples. In the twentieth century words have returned with a vengeance. In music, words were not banished until the beginning of the seventeenth century; they have asserted themselves in opera, in oratorio, in Lieder. The cinema is another obvious case in point. Few silent films were made without intertitles. Erwin Panofsky has recollected his cinema-going days in Berlin around 1910:

The producers employed means of clarification similar to those we find in medieval art. One of these was printed titles or letters, striking equivalents of the medieval miniatures and scrolls (at a still earlier date there even used to be explainers who would say, vive voix, "Now he thinks his wife is dead but she isn't" or "I don't wish to offend the ladies in the audience but I doubt that any of them would have done that much for her child").

In Japan, explainers of this kind formed themselves into a guild, which proved strong enough to delay the advent of the talkie. In the end Barthes reached the conclusion that semiology might be better seen as a branch of linguistics, rather than the other way round. This seems a desperate conclusion. The province turns out to be so much "the most complex and universal" that it engulfs the whole. Yet our experience of cinema suggests that great complexity of meaning can be expressed through images. Thus, to take an obvious example, the most trivial and banal book can be made into an extremely interesting and, to all appearances, significant film; reading a screenplay is usually a barren and arid experience, intellectually as well as emotionally. The implication of this is that it is not only systems exclusively grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign which are expressive and meaningful. Natural signs cannot be as readily dismissed as Saussure imagined; it is this demand for the reintegration of the natural sign into semiology which led Christian Metz, a disciple of Barthes, to declare that cinema is indeed a language, but language without a code (without a langue, to use Saussure's term). It is a language because it has texts; there is a meaningful discourse. But, unlike verbal language, it cannot be referred back to a pre-existent code. Metz's position involves him in a considerable number of problems which he never satisfactorily surmounts; he is forced back to the concept of a "logic of implication" by which the image becomes language's; he quotes with approval Bela Baláz's contention that it is through a "current of induction" that we make sense of a film. It is not made clear whether we have to learn this logic or...
and 1935, twenty years after his death in 1914. Peirce was the most original American thinker there has been, so original, as Roman Jakobson has pointed out, that for a great part of his working life he was unable to obtain a university post. His reputation grew principally on his more accessible work, mainly his teachings on pragmatism. His work on semiology (or ‘semiotic’ as he himself called it) has been sadly neglected. Unfortunately, his most influential disciple, Charles Morris, travelled his position by coupling it with a virulent form of Behaviourism. Severe criticisms of Behaviourism in relation to linguistics and aesthetics, from writers such as E. H. Gombrich and Noam Chomsky, have naturally tended to damage Peirce by association with Morris. However, in recent years, Roman Jakobson has done a great deal to reawaken interest in Peirce’s semiology, a revival of enthusiasm long overdue.

The main texts which concern us here are his Speculative Grammar, the letters to Lady Welby and Existential Graphs (subtitled ‘my chef d’œuvre’ by Peirce). These books contain Peirce’s taxonomy of different classes of signs, which he regarded as the essential semiotic foundation for a subsequent logic and rhetoric. The classification which is important to our argument is that which Peirce called the second trichotomy of signs: their division into iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. An icon, according to Peirce, is a sign which represents its object mainly by its similarity to it; the relationship between signifier and signified is not arbitrary but is one of resemblance or likeness. Thus, for instance, the portrait of a man resembles him ‘iconically’, although, it may be divided into two sub-classes: images and diagrams. In the case of icons, ‘simple qualities’ are alike; in the case of diagrams, the relations between the parts. Many diagrams, of course, contain symboloid features: Peirce readily admitted this, for he was the dominant aspect or dimension of the sign which concerned him.

An index is a sign by virtue of an existential bond between itself and its object. Peirce gave several examples.

I see a man with a rolling gait. This is a probable indication that he is a sailor. I see a bow-legged man in corduroys, gaiters and a jacket. These are probable indications that he is a jockey or something of the sort. A sundial or clock indicates the time of day.

Other examples cited by Peirce are the weathercock, a sign of the direction of the wind which physically moves it, the barometer, the spirit-level. Roman Jakobson cites Man Friday’s footprint in the sand and medical symptoms, such as pulse rates and so on. Symptomatology is a branch of the study of the indexical sign.

The third category of sign, the symbol, corresponds to Saussure’s arbitrariness. Like Saussure, Peirce speaks of a ‘contract’ by virtue of which the symbol is a sign. The symbolic sign eludes the individual will. ‘You can write down the word “star”, but that does not make you the creator of the word, nor if you erase it have you destroyed the word. The word lives in the minds of those who use it’. A symbolic sign demands neither resemblance to its object nor an existential bond with it. It is conventional and has the force of a law. Peirce was concerned about the appropriateness of calling this kind of sign a ‘symbol’, a possibility which Saussure also
considered but rejected because of the danger of confusion. However, it seems certain that Sausure over-restricted the notion of sign by limiting it to Peirce's 'symbolic'; moreover, Peirce's trichotomy is elegant and exhaustive. The principal remaining problem, the categorisation of such so-called 'symbols' as the scales of justice or the Christian cross, is one that is soluble within Peirce's system, as I shall show later.

Peirce's categories are the foundation for any advance in semiology. It is important to note, however, that Peirce did not consider them to be mutually exclusive. On the contrary, all three aspects frequently—sometimes suggest, invariably—overlap and are co-present. It is this awareness of overlapping which enabled Peirce to make some particularly relevant remarks about photography.

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection.

That is, to the indexical class. Elsewhere he describes a photographic print as a 'quasi-predicate', of which the light rays are the 'quasi-subject'.

Among European writers on semiology Roland Barthes reaches somewhat similar conclusions, though he does not use the category 'indexical', but sees the photographic print simply as 'iconic'. However, he describes how the photographic icon represents 'a kind of natural being-there of the object'. There is no human intervention, no transformation, no code, between the object and the sign; hence the paradox that a photograph is a message without a code. Christian Metz makes the transition from photography to cinema. Indeed, Metz merges upon using Peirce's concepts, mediated to him through the work of André Martinet.

A close-up of a revolver does not signify 'revolver' (a purely potential lexical unit)—but signifies as a minimum, leaving aside its connotations, 'Here is a revolver'. It carries with it own actualisation, a kind of 'Here is' ('Voici': the very word which André Martinet considers to be a pure index of actualisation).

It is curious that Metz, in his voluminous writings, does not lay much greater stress on the analysis of this aspect of the cinema, since he is extremely hostile to any attempt to see the cinema as a symbolic process which refers back to a code. In fact, obscured beneath his semiological analysis is a very definite and frequently overt aesthetic parti pris. For, like Barthes and Sausure, he perceives only two modes of existence for the sign, natural and cultural. Moreover, he is inclined to see these as mutually exclusive, so that a language must be either natural or cultural, uncoded or coded. It cannot be both. Hence Metz's view of the cinema turns out like a curious inverted mirror image of Noam Chomsky's view of verbal language; whereas Chomsky banishes the ungrammatical into outer darkness, Metz banishes the grammatical. The work of Roman Jakobson, influenced by Peirce, is, as we shall see, a corrective to both these views. The cinema contains all three modes of the sign:

indexical, iconic and symbolic. What has always happened is that theorists of the cinema have seized on one or other of these dimensions and used it as the ground for an aesthetic firmars. Metz is no exception.

In his aesthetic preferences, Metz is quite clearly indebted to André Bazin, the most forceful and intelligent protagonist of 'realism' in the cinema. Bazin was one of the founders of Cahiers du Cinema and wrote frequently in Études, the review founded by Emmanuel Mounier, the Catholic philosopher, originator of Personalism and the most important intellectual influence on Bazin. Many people have commented on the way in which Bazin modelled his style, somewhat
abstruse, unafraid of plunging into the problems and terminology of philosophy, on that of Mounier. Bazin became interested in the cinema during his military service at Bordeaux in 1939. After his return to Paris he organised, in collaboration with friends from Esprit, clandestine film shows; during the German Occupation he showed films such as Fritz Lang’s Metropolis and the banned works of Chaplin. Then, after the Liberation, he became one of the dominant figures in orienting the fantastic efflorescence of cinema culture which grew up in the clubs, in Henri Langlois’s magnificent Cinémathèque, in the commercial cinemas, where American films once again reappeared. During this time, perhaps most important of all, Bazin developed his aesthetics of the cinema, an aesthetics antithetical to the ‘pure cinema’ of Duelle and the ‘montage’ theory of Malraux’s celebrated article in Verve. A new direction was taken.

Bazin’s starting-point is an ontology of the photographic image. His conclusions are remarkably close to those of Peirce. Time and again Bazin speaks of photography in terms of a mould, a death-mask, a Veronica, the Holy Shroud of Turin, a relic, an imprint. Thus Bazin speaks of the lesser plastic arts, the moulding of death-masks for example, which likewise involves a certain automatic process. One might consider photography in this sense as a moulding the taking of an impression, by the manipulation of light. Thus Bazin repeatedly stresses the existential bond between sign and object which, for Peirce, was the determining characteristic of the indexical sign. But whereas Peirce made his observation in order to found a logic, Bazin wished to found an aesthetic. Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty: Bazin’s aesthetic asserted the primacy of the object over the image, the primacy of the

natural world over the world of signs. ‘Nature is always photogenic’, this was Bazin’s watchword.

Bazin developed a bipolar view of the cinema. On the one hand was Realism (‘The good, the true, the just’) as Godard was later to say of the work of Rossellini); on the other was Expressionism, the deforming intervention of human agency. Fidelity to nature was the necessary touchstone of judgement. Those who transgressed, Bazin denounced: Fritz Lang’s Nibelungen, The Cabinet of Dr Caligari. He recognised the Wagnerian ambitions of Eisenstein’s Ivan the Terrible and wrote: ‘One can detest opera, believe it to be a doomed musical genre, while still recognising the value of Wagner’s music.’ Similarly, we may admire Eisenstein, while still condemning his project as ‘an aggressive return of a dangerous aesthetics’. Bazin found the constant falsification in The Third Man exasperating. In a brilliant article he compared Hollywood to the court at Versailles and asked where was its Phèdre? He found the answer, justly, in Charles Vidor’s Gilda. Yet even this masterpiece was stripped of all ‘natural accident’, an aesthetic cannot be founded on an ‘existential void’.

In counterposition to these recurrent regressions into Expressionism, Bazin postulated a triumphant tradition of Realism. This tradition began with Flaubert, spontaneously, naively, and then developed in the 1920s in the films of Flaherty, Strobist and Murnau, whom Bazin contrasted with Eisenstein, Kuleshov and Gance. In the 1930s the tradition was kept alive principally by Jean Renoir. Bazin saw Renoir stemming from the tradition of his father, that of French Impressionism. Just as the French Impressionists – Manet, Degas, Bonnard – had reformulated the place of the picture frame in pictorial composition, under the influence of the snapshot, so Renoir had reformulated the place of the frame in cinematographic composition. In contrast to Eisenstein’s principle of montage, based on the sacrosanct close-up, the significant image centred in the frame, he had developed what Bazin called re-cadre (‘re-framing’): lateral camera movements deserted and recaptured a continuous reality. The blackness surrounding the screen masked off the world rather than framed the image. In the 1930s Jean Renoir alone forced himself to look beyond the resources provided by montage and to uncover the secret of a film form that would permit everything to be said without chopping the world up into little fragments, that would reveal the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them.

In the 1940s the Realist tradition resurfaced itself, though divided between two different currents. The first of these was inaugurated by Citizen Kane and continued in the later films of Welles and Wyler. Its characteristic feature was the use of deep focus. By this means, the spatial unity of scenes could be maintained, episodes could be presented in their physical entirety. The second current was that of Italian Neo-realism, whose cause Bazin espoused with especial fervour. Above all, he admired Rossellini. In Neo-realism Bazin recognised fidelity to nature, to things as they were. Fiction was reduced to a minimum. Acting, location, incident: all were as natural as possible. Of Bicycle Thieves Bazin wrote that it was the first example of ‘free cinema’. No more actors, no more plot, no more mise en scène —
the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality. In fact, no more cinema. Thus the film could obtain radical purity only through its own annihilation. The mystical tone of this kind of argument reflects, of course, the curious admixture of Catholicism and Existentialism which had formed Bazin. Yet it also develops logically from an aesthetic which stresses the passivity of the natural world rather than the agency of the human mind.

Bazin hoped that the two currents of the Realist tradition — Welles and Rossellini — would one day reconcile. He felt that their separation was due only to technical limitations; deep focus required more powerful lighting than could be used on natural locations. But when Visconti’s La terra trema appeared, a film whose style was for the first time the same ‘both intra and extra muro’, the most Wellesian of Neo-realist films, nevertheless Bazin was disappointed. The synthesis, though achieved, lacked fire and ‘effective eloquence’. Probably Visconti was too
close to the opera, to Expressionism, to be able to satisfy Bazin. But in the late 1940s and 1950s his concept of Realism did develop a step further, towards what, in a review of *La strada*, he was to call 'realism of the person' ("de la personne"). The echo of Mounier was not by chance. Bazin was deeply influenced by Mounier's insistence that the interior and the exterior, the spiritual and the physical, the ideal and the material, were indissolubly linked. He reoriented the philosophical and socio-political ideas of Mounier and applied them to the cinema. Bazin broke with many of the Italian protagonists of Neo-realism when he...
asserted that "Visconti is Neo-realist in La terra tremata when he calls for social revolt and Rossellini is Neo-realist in the Fioretti, which illustrates a purely spiritual reality." In Bresson's films Bazin saw "the outward revelation of an interior density," in those of Rossellini "the presence of the spiritual" is expressed with "breath-taking obviousness." The exterior, through the transparency of images stripped of all inessentials, reveals the interior. Bazin emphasised the importance of physiognomy, upon which - as in the films of Dreyer - the interior spiritual life was etched and printed.

Bazin believed that films should be made, not according to some a priori method or plan, but, like those of Rossellini, from fragments of raw reality, multiple and equivocal in themselves, whose meaning can only emerge a posteriori thanks to other facts, between which the mind is able to see relations. Realism was the vocation of the cinema, not to signify but to reveal. Realism, for Bazin, had little to do with mimesis. He felt that cinema was closer to the art of the Egyptians which existed, in Pudovkin's words, "in a sphere of magical reality" than to that of the Greeks "in a sphere of aesthetic ideality." It was the existential bond between fact and image, world and film, which counted for most in Bazin's aesthetic, rather than any quality of similitude or resemblance. Hence the possibility - even the necessity - of an art which could reveal spiritual states. There was for Bazin a double movement of impression, of moulding and imprinting; first, the interior spiritual suffering was stamped upon the exterior physiognomy; then the exterior physiognomy was stamped and printed upon the sensitive film.

It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of Bazin's aesthetic. His influence can be seen in the critical writing of Andrew Sarris in the United States, in the theories of Pier Paolo Pasolini in Italy, in Charles Barr's lucid article on CinemaScope (published in Film Quarterly, Summer 1963, but written in England), in Christian Metz's articles in Communications and Cahiers du Cinéma. That is to say, all the most important writing on cinema in the last ten or twenty years has, by and large, charted out the course first set by Bazin. For all these writers Rossellini occupies a central place in film history. "Things are there. Why manipulate them?" For Metz, Rossellini's question serves as a kind of motto: Rossellini, through his experience as a film-maker, had struck upon the same truth that the semiotist achieved by dint of scholarship. Both Metz and Barr contrast Rossellini with Eisenstein, the villain of the piece. They even fall into the same metaphors. Thus Barr, writing of Pudovkin, who is used interchangeably with Eisenstein, describes how he

reminds one of the bakers who first extract the nourishing parts of the flour, process it, and then put back some as 'extra goodness' the result may be edible, but it is hardly the only way to make bread, and one can criticise it for being unnecessary and 'synthetic.' Indeed, one could extend the culinary analogy and say that the experience put over by the traditional aesthetic is essentially a prejudice one.

And Metz: 'Prosthesis is to the leg as the cybernetic message is to the human phrase. And why not also mention - to introduce a lighter note and a change from Meccano - powdered milk and Nescafé? And all the various kinds of robot?' Thus

Rossellini's Flowers of St. Francis.

Rossellini becomes a natural wholemeal director while Eisenstein is an ersatz, artificial, predigested. Behind these judgements stands the whole force of Romantic aesthetics: natural versus artificial, organic versus mechanical, imagination versus fancy.

But the Rossellini versus Eisenstein antinomy is not so cut-and-dried as it might appear. First, we should remember that for Bazin it was Expressionism that was the mortal foe: The Cabinet of Dr Caligari rather than Battleship Potemkin or October. And, then, what of a director like Sternberg, closely in the Expressionist tradition? It is remarkable that Sternberg managed to style performances as late into the talkies as he did. And Sarris's observation immediately suggests that Sternberg must be arrayed against Rossellini. Yet, in the same paragraph, Sarris comments upon Sternberg's eschewal of 'pointless cutting within scenes,' his achievements as a 'non-montage director.' This is the same kind of problem that Bazin met with Dreyer, whose work be much admired, including its studio sequences. The case of Dreyer's Jeanne d'Arc is a little more subtle since at first sight nature plays a non-existent role. Bazin found a way out of the dilemma through the absence of make-up. It is a documentary of faces... The whole of nature palpitates beneath every pore.' But his dyadic model had been dangerously shaken.

The truth is that a tridisc model is necessary, following Peirce's trichotomy of the signs. Bazin, as we have seen, developed an aesthetic which was founded upon the indexical character of the photographic image. Metz constructs this with an aesthetic which assumes that cinema, to be meaningful, must refer back to a code, to a grammar of some kind, that the language of cinema must be primarily symbolic. But there is a third alternative. Sternberg was virulently opposed to any kind
of Realism. He sought, as far as possible, to disown and destroy the existential bond between the natural world and the film image. But this did not mean that he turned to the symbolic. Instead, he stressed the pictorial character of the cinema; he saw cinema in the light, not of the natural world or of verbal language, but of painting. 'The white canvas on to which the images are thrown is a two-dimensional flat surface. It is not startlingly new, the painter has used it for centuries.' The film director must create his own images, not by slavishly following nature, but by imposing his own style, his own interpretation. 'The painter's power over his subject is unlimited, his control over the human form and face de rigueur; but the director is at the mercy of his camera; the dilemma of the film director is there, in the mechanical contraption he is compelled to use. Unless he controls it, he abdicates. For 'verisimilitude, whatever its virtue, is in opposition to every approach to art.' Sternberg created a completely artificial realm, from which nature was rigorously excluded (the main thing wrong with The Saga of Anatahan, he once said, is that it contained shots of the real sea, whereas everything else was false) but which depended, not on any common code, but on the individual imagination of the artist. It was the iconic aspect of the sign which Sternberg stressed, detached from the indexical in order to conjure up a world, comprehensible by virtue of resemblances to the natural world, yet other than it, a kind of dream world, a heterocosm.

The contrast with Rossellini is striking. Rossellini preferred to shoot on location; Sternberg always used a set. Rossellini avered that he never used a shooting-script and never knew how a film would end when he began it; Sternberg cut every sequence in his head before shooting it and never hesitated while editing.
Rossellini's films have a rough-and-ready, sketch-like look; Sternberg evidently paid meticulous attention to every detail. Rossellini used amateur actors, without makeup. Sternberg took the star system to its ultimate limit with Marlene Dietrich and revealed in hieratic masks and costumes. Rossellini spoke of the director being patient, waiting humbly and following the actors until they revealed themselves; Sternberg, rather than wishing humbly to reveal the essence, sought to exert autocratic control: he fastened the set with nets, veils, fronds, creepers, lattices, streamers, gauze, in order, as he himself put it, 'to conceal the actors', to mask their very existence.

Yet even Sternberg is not the extreme: this in animated film, usually left to one side by theorists of the cinema. But the separation is not clear-cut. Sternberg has recounted how the aircraft in The Song of Atlantis was drawn with pen and ink. He also sprayed trees and sets with aluminium paint, a kind of extension of make-up to cover the whole of nature, rather than the human face alone. In the same way, Max Ophuls painted trees gold and the road red in his masterpiece Lola Montez. Alain Jessua, who worked with Ophuls, has described how he took the logical next step forward and, in Comic Strip Hero, tinted the film. John Huston made similar experiments. And Jessua also introduced the comic-strip into the cinema. There is no reason at all why the photographic image should not be combined with the artificial image, tinted or drawn. This is common practice outside the cinema, in advertising and in the work of artists such as El Lissitzky, George Grosz and Robert Rauschenberg.

Semioticians have been surprisingly silent on the subject of iconic signs. They suffer from two prejudices: firstly, in favour of the arbitrary and the symbolic, secondly in favour of the spoken and the acoustic. With these prejudices are to be found in the work of Saussure, for whom language was a symbolic system which operated in one privileged sensory band. Even writing has persistently been assigned an inferior place by linguists who have seen in the alphabet in the written letter only 'the sign of a sign', a secondary, artificial, exterior sub-system. These prejudices must be broken down. What is needed is a revival of the seventeenth-century science of characters, comprising the study of the whole range of communication within the visual sensory band, from writing, numbers and algebra through to the images of photography and the cinema. Within this band it will be found that signs range from those in which the symbolic aspect is clearly dominant, such as letters and numbers, arbitrary and discrete, through to signs in which the indexical aspect is dominant, such as the documentary photograph. Between these extremes, in the centre of the range, there is a considerable degree of overlap, of the co-existence of different aspects without any evident predominance of any one of them.

In the cinema, it is quite clear, indexical and iconic aspects are by far the most powerful. The symbolic is limited and secondary. But from the early days of film there has been a persistent, though understandable, tendency to exaggerate the importance of analogies with verbal language. The main reason for this, there seems little doubt, has been the desire to validate cinema as an art.

Clearly, a great deal of the influence which Bazin has exerted has been due to his ability to see the indexical aspect of the cinema as its essence - in the same way as its detractors - yet, at the same time, celebrate its artistic status. In fact, Bazin never argued the distinction between art and non-art within the cinema; his inclination was to be able to accept anything as art thus, for example, his praise of documentary films such as Kon-Tiki and Anastasia which struck him forcibly. Christian Metz has attempted to fill this gap in Bazin's argument, but by no means with striking success. In the final analysis, it is on account of its wealth of connotations that a novel of Proust is more than a cookbook or a film of Visconti from a medical documentary. Connotations, however, are uncoded, imprecise and nebulous: he does not believe that it would be possible to dissolve them into a rhetoric. In the last resort, the problem of art is the problem of style: the author of an idiot. For Metz aesthetic value is purely a matter of expressiveness: it has nothing to do with conceptual thought. Here again Metz reveals the basic Romanticism of his outlook. In fact, the aesthetic richness of the cinema springs from the fact that it comprises all three dimensions of the sign: indexical, iconic and symbolic. The great weakness of almost all those who have written about the cinema is that they have taken only one of these dimensions, made it the ground of their aesthetic, the 'essential' dimension of the cinematic sign, and discarded the rest. This is to impoverish the cinema. Moreover, none of these dimensions can be divorced: they are co-present. The great merit of Peirce's analysis of signs is that he did not see the different aspects as mutually exclusive. Unlike Saussure he did not show any particular prejudice in favour of one or the other. Indeed, he wanted a logic of a rhetoric which would be based on all three aspects. It is only by considering the interrelation of these different dimensions of the cinema that we can understand its aesthetic effect.

Exactly the same is true of verbal language which, of course, predominantly a symbolic system. This is the dimension which Saussure illuminated so brilliantly; but to the exclusion of every other. He gave short shrift, for instance, to onomatopoeia. 'Onomatopoeia might be used to prove that the choice of signifier is not always arbitrary. But onomatopoeic formations are never organic elements
of a linguistic system. Besides, their number is much smaller than is generally sup-
pposed. In recent years, the balance has been somewhat redressed by Roman
Jakobson, who has made persistent efforts to focus attention once again on the
work of Peirce. Jakobson has pointed out that, whereas Saussure held that 'signs
that are wholly arbitrary realise better than the others the ideal of the semiologi-
cal process', Peirce believed that in the most perfect of signs the iconic, the
indexical and the symbolic would be amalgamated as nearly as possible in equal
proportions.

Jakobson has written on several occasions about the iconic and indexical as-
pects of verbal language. The iconic, for instance, is manifest not only in one-
matopoeia, but also in the syntactic structure of language. Thus a sentence like
'Veni, vidi, vici' reflects in its own temporal sequence that of the events which it
describes. There is a resemblance, a similarity, between the syntactic order of the
sentence and the historic order of the world. Again, Jakobson points out that there
is no known language in which the plural is represented by the subtraction of a
morpheme whereas, of course, in very many a morpheme is added. He also inves-
tigates the role of synesthesia in language. In a brilliant article, 'Shifters, verbal
categories, and the Russian verb', Jakobson discusses the indexical dimensions of
language. He focuses particular attention on pronouns, whose meaning — at one
level — varies from message to message. This is because it is determined by the par-
ticular existential content. Thus when I say 'I', there is an existential bond between
this utterance and myself, of which the hearer must be aware to grasp the signifi-
cance of what is being said. Pronouns also have a symbolic aspect—they denote the 'source' of an utterance, in general terms—which makes them comprehensible on one level, at least, even when the actual identity of the source is unknown.

The indexical aspect also comes to the fore in words such as 'here', 'there', 'that', and so on. Tenses are also indexical; they depend for full intelligibility on knowledge of the point in time at which a message was uttered.

Jakobson has also pointed out how these submerged dimensions of language become particularly important in literature and in poetry. He quotes with approval Pope's 'alliterative precept' to poets that 'the sound must seem an Echo of the sense' and stresses that poetry 'is a province where the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent into patent and manifests itself most intensely and palpably'. The same is surely true, mutatis mutandis, of the cinema. Unlike verbal language, primarily symbolic, the cinema is, as we have seen, primarily indexical and iconic. It is the symbolic which is the submerged dimension. We should therefore expect that in the 'poetry' of the cinema, this aspect will be manifested more palpably.

In this respect, the iconography of the cinema (which, in Peirce's terms, is not the same as the iconic) is particularly interesting. Metz has minimised the importance of iconography. He discusses the epoch in which good cowboys wore whites shirts and bad cowboys black shirts, only in order to dismiss this incursion of the symbolic as unstable and fragile. Panofsky has also doubted the importance of iconography in the cinema.

There arose, identifiable by standardized appearance, behaviour and attributes, the well-remembered types of the Vamp and the Straight Girl (perhaps the most convincing modern equivalents of the medieval personifications of the Vices and Virtues), the Family Man and the Villain, the latter marked by a black moustache and walking-stick. Nocturnal scenes were printed on blue or green film. A chequered tablecloth meant, once for all, a 'poor but honest' milieu, a happy marriage, soon to be endangered by the shadows from the past, was symbolised by the young wife's pouring the breakfast coffee for her husband; the first kiss was invariably announced by the lady's gently playing with her partner's necktie and was invariably accompanied by her kicking out her left foot.

But as audiences grew more sophisticated—and particularly after the invention of the talking film—they 'devices became gradually less necessary'. Nevertheless, 'primitive symbolism' does survive, to Panofsky's pleasure, 'in such amusing details as the last sequence of Casablanca where the delightfully crooked and right-minded police chief dunks an empty bottle of Vichy water into the waste-paper basket'.

In fact, I think, both Metz and Panofsky vastly underestimate the extent to which 'primitive symbolism' does survive, if indeed that is the right word at all, with its hardly muffled condemnation to death. Counter to the old post-Einsteinian overvaluation of the symbolic there has developed an equally strong prejudice against symbols. Barthes, for example, has commented on the 'peripheral zone' in which a kernel of rhetoric persists. He cites, as an instance, calendar pages torn away to show the passage of time. But recourse to rhetoric, he feels, means to welcome mediocrity. It is possible to convey 'Pigalle-nons' or 'Paris-nons' with shots of neon, cigarette-girls and so on, or with boulevard cafés and the Eiffel Tower, but for us rhetoric of this kind is discredited. It may still hold good in the Chinese theatre where a complicated code is used to express, say, weeping, but in
Europe 'to show one is weeping, one must weep'. And, of course, the rejection of convention entails a no less draconian respect for nature'. We are back in familiar territory: cinema is pseudo-physio, not techni.

Thus Roland Barthes sweeps away the American musical, It's Always Fair Weather and On the Town, condemned to mediocrity by their recourse to rhetoric to convey 'New York-ness'. And what about Hitchcock: The Birds or Vertigo? The symbolic structure of the ascent and fall in Lola Montès or La Ronde? Welles? The sharks, the wheelchair, the hall of mirrors in Lady from Shanghai? Buñuel's The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance? The extraordinary symbolic scenes in the films of Douglas Sirk, Imitation of Life or Written on the Wind? Eisenstein's peacock is by no means the length and breadth of symbolism in the cinema. It is impossible to neglect this whole rich domain of meaning. Finally, Rosellini: what are we to say of the Venetian lovers in Voyage to Italy, the record of Hitler's voice playing among the ruins in Germany Year Zero, the man-eating tiger in India?

At this point, however, we must go forward with caution. Words such as symbol carry with them the risk of confusion. We have seen how Saussure's usage is not compatible with Peirce's. For Peirce the linguistic sign is a symbol, in a narrow and scientific sense. For Saussure, the linguistic sign is arbitrary, whereas

one characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot.

The confusion has been increased still further by Hjelmslev and the Copenhagen school:

From the linguistic side there have been some misgivings about applying the term symbol to entities that stand in a purely arbitrary relationship to their interpretation. From this point of view, symbol should be used only of entities that are isomorphic with their interpretation, entities that are depictions or emblems, like Thorwaldsen's Christ as a symbol for compassion, the hammer and sickle as a symbol for Communism, scales as a symbol for justice, or the anatomotopics in the sphere of language.

Hjelmslev, however, chose to use the term in a far broader application: as he put it, games such as chess, and perhaps music and mathematics, are symbolic systems, as opposed to semiotics. He suggested that there was an affinity between isomorphic symbols, such as the hammer and sickle, and the pieces in a game, pawns or bishops. Barthes complicated the issue still more by stressing that symbols had no adequate or exact meaning. 'Christianity' 'outruns' the cross.

What should we say about the hammer and sickle, the Christian cross, the scales of justice? First, unlike Hjelmslev, we must distinguish clearly between depiction or image, the Peirce would say, and an emblem. An image is predominantly iconic. An emblem, however, is a mixed sign, partially iconic, partially symbolic. Moreover, this dual character of the emblem can be overtly exploited. Pasikowsky cites the examples of Diderot's portrait of Lucas Paumgarten as St George, Titian's Andrea Doria as Neptune, Reynolds's Lady Stanhope as

Hall of mirrors in Orson Welles's Lady from Shanghai.
Contemplation. Emblems are unstable, labile: they may develop into predominantly symbolic signs or fall back into the iconic. Lessing, in the *Lincoln*, saw the problem with great clarity. The symbolic or allegorical, he held, are necessary to painters but redundant to poets, for verbal language, which has priority, is symbolic in itself.

Urania is for the poets the Muse of Astronomy: from her name, from her functions, we recognize her office. The artist in order to make it distinguishable must exhibit her with a pointer and celestial globe, this attitude of hers provides his alphabet from which he helps us to put together the name Urania. But when the poet would say that Urania has long ago foretold his death by the stars—"ipsa die postis letum praedisserat astra Urania"—why should he, thinking of the painter, add thereto, Urania, the pointer in her hand, the celestial globe before her? Would it not be as if a man who can and may speak aloud should at the same time still make use of the words which the mute in the Turk's seraglio have invented for lack of utterance?

Lessing described a scale of representations between the purely iconic and the purely symbolic. The bridge in the hand of Temperance and the pillar on which Steadfastness loses are clearly allegorical.

The scales in the hand of Justice are certainly less purely allegorical, because the right use of the scales is really a part of justice. But the lyre or flute in the hand of a Muse, the spear in the hand of Mars, the hammer and tongs in the hand of Vulcan, are not symbols at all, but mere instruments.

Painters should minimize the symbolic—the extreme case, 'the inscribed labels which issue from the mouths of the persons in ancient Gothic pictures', Lessing disapproved of entirely. He looked forward to an art which would be more purely iconic, much more than he ever anticipated: Courbet, the plein air painters, the Impressionists. In fact, what happened is that, as the symbolic was coaxed, the ideological began to make itself felt. Painters began to be interested in optics and the psychology of perception. Indeed, Courbet sounds strangely like Bazin:

I maintain, in addition, that painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the representation of real and existing things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects: an object which is abstract, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting... The beautiful exists in nature and may be encountered in the midst of reality under the most diverse aspects. As soon as it is found there, it belongs to art, or rather, to the artist who knows how to see it there. As soon as beauty is real and visible, it has its artistic expression from these very qualities. Artifice has no right to amplify this expression; by meddling with it, one only runs the risk of perverting and, consequently, of weakening it. The beauty provided by nature is superior to all the conventions of the artist.

One current in the history of art has been the abandonment of the lexicon of emblems and the turn to nature itself, to the existential contiguity of painter and object which Courbet demanded. At the end of this road lay photography; under its impact painting began to oscillate violently.

The iconic sign is the most labile; it observes neither the norms of convention nor the physical laws which govern the index, neither thani nor nomos. Depiction is pulled towards the antinomic poles of photography and embalistics. Both these underrunings are co-present in the iconic sign; neither can be conclusively suppressed. Nor is it true, as Barthes avers, that the symbolic dimension of the iconic sign is not adequate, not conceptually fixed. To say that 'Christianity' 'outs' the cross is no different in order from saying that Christianity outruns the word Christianity or divinity outruns the mere name of God. To see transcendent meaning is the task of the mystic, not the scientist. Barthes is dangerously close to Barth, with his 'impenetrable incognitio' of Jesus Christ. There is no doubt that the cross can serve as a plastic signal and as a degenerate index, triggering off an effusive and devout meditation, but this should be radically distinguished from the conceptual content articulated by the symbolic sign.

It is particularly important to admit the presence of the symbolic—hence conceptual—dimension of the cinema because this is a necessary guarantee of objective criticism. The iconic is shifting and elusive; it defies capture by the critic. We can see the problem very clearly if we consider a concrete example: Christian M. parle's interpretation of a famous shot from Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico!* Metz describes the heads of three peasants who have been buried in the sand, their tormented yet peaceful faces, after they have been trampled upon by the hooves of their oppressors' horses. At the denotive level the image means that they have suffered, they are dead. But there is also a connotative level: the nobility of the landscape, the beautiful, typically Eisensteinian, triangular composition of the shot. At this second level the image expressed 'the grandeur of the Mexican people, the certainty of final victory, a kind of passionate love which the northerner feels for the sun-drenched splendour of the scene'. The Italian writer on aesthetics, Galvano della Volpe, has argued that this kind of interpretation has no objective validity, that it could never be established and argued like the paraphrasable meaning of a verbal text. There is no objective code: therefore there can only be subjective impressions. Cinema criticism, della Volpe concludes, must exist de facto, but it cannot exist de jure.

There is no way of telling what an image connotes in the sense in which Metz uses the word, even less accurate than its sense in what Peirce called 'I. S. Mills' objectionable terminology.' Della Volpe is right about this. But, like Metz, he too underestimates the possibility of a symbolic dimension in the cinematic message, the possibility, if not of arriving at a de jure criticism, at least of approaching it, maximizing lucidity, minimizing ambiguity. For the cinematic sign, the language or semiotic of cinema, like the verbal language, comprises not only the indexical and the iconic, but also the symbolic. Indeed, if we consider the origins of the cinema, strikingly mixed and impure, it would be astonishing if it were otherwise. Cinema did not only develop technically out of the magic lantern, the daguerreotype, the phenakistoscope and similar devices — its history of Realism—but also out of strip cartoons, Wild West shows, automata, pulp novels, barnstorming melodramas, magic — its history of the narrative and the marvelous. Lomisite and Mélis are not like Cain and Abel; there is no need for one to eliminate the other. It is quite misleading to validate one dimension of the cinema
TABLE POUR 100C

Jean-Luc Godard: Made in U.S.A.

THE MODEL

unilaterally at the expense of all the others. There is no pure cinema, grounded on a single essence, hermetically sealed from contamination.

This explains the value of a director like Jean-Luc Godard, who is not afraid to mix Hollywood with Kant and Hegel, Eisensteinian montage with Rossellini's Realism, words with images, professional actors with historical people, Lumière with Méliès, the documentary with the iconographic. More than anybody else Godard has realised the fantastic possibilities of the cinema as a medium of communication and expression. In his hands, as in Péret's perfect sign, the cinema has become an almost equal amalgam of the symbolic, the iconic and the indexical.

His films have conceptual meaning, pictorial beauty, and documentary truth. It is no surprise that his influence should proliferate among directors throughout the world. The film-maker is fortunate to be working in the most semiotically complex of all media, the most aesthetically rich. We can repeat today Abel Gance's words four decades ago: 'The time of the image has come.'

Conclusion (1972)

Looking back over this book, even after a short distance of time, it strikes me that it was written at the beginning of a transitional period which is not yet over. What marks this period, I think, is a delayed encounter of the cinema with the 'modern movement' in the arts. The great breakthroughs in literature, painting and music, the hammer-blows which smashed (or should have smashed) traditional aesthetics, took place in the years before the First World War, at a time when the cinema was in its infancy, a novelty in the world of vaudeville, peepshows and nickelodeons. This was the period of the first abstract paintings, the first sound poems, the first noise bands. It was also the period when the idea of semiology was launched by Saussure in his Geneva Course and when Freud was making the most important of his discoveries. Precisely because the cinema was a new art, it took time for any of this to have an effect on it.

The first impact of the 'modern movement' on the cinema took place in the 20s.

The clearest example of this, of course, is Eisenstein. At the same time there was the work of the Parisian avant-garde — Léger, Man Ray, Buñuel — and of abstract film-makers like Eggeling and Richter. In Germany Expressionism fed into the cinema in the form of 'Caligariism', mainly under Eric Pommier's patronage. But looking back on it, we can see how superficial this first contact was and how it was completely obliterated during the 30s. In Russia, socialist realism was launched and the avant-garde cinema of the 20s cut short. In Germany, Pommier lost control of UFA after the financial disaster of Metropolis and soon, in any case, the Nazi regime was in power. The early experiments of Léger or Richter petered out. Buñuel went his own way. Fischinger was working for Disney in the 30s; Moholy-Nagy for Korda. If there was any kind of avant-garde in this period, it was to be found in the documentary movement, certainly the most conservative avant-garde imaginable.

The rise of the sound film and the rapid expansion of American economic and political power after the war led to the domination of Hollywood throughout most of the world. It is in this context that a director like Orson Welles could appear as an innovator, a dangerous experimentalist, Rossellini as a revolutionary, Humphrey Jennings a poet. Today these estimations seem absurd. There has been a complete change, a revaluation, a shift of focus which had made cinema history into something different. Eisenstein or Vertov look contemporary instead of antique. Welles or Jennings look hopelessly old-fashioned and dated. Yet this change has been very recent and its full effects are still to be felt. All the old landmarks are disappearing in the mist of time.

What has happened? Really, two things. First, the rise of the underground, particularly in America. This was a product of three factors: poets and painters taking