8. Christian Metz and Modern Cinema

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Abstract
In three essays written in 1966-1967, Christian Metz retraces the debate on ‘modern cinema’ and foregrounds his own interpretation: ‘new cinemas’ are characterized on the one hand by unprecedented linguistic procedures – among them what Metz calls potential sequence – and on the other hand by an extension of the possibilities of ‘saying’ something – an extension of the ‘sayable’ or of the ‘representable’. Such a novelty implies a greater role of the ‘possible’ and the ‘potential’, both in a discourse and in the linguistic system, as well as requiring a reconsideration of some of the axioms of structuralism. What emerges is a more flexible and comprehensive theoretical framework, which Metz and film semiotics would develop in the following years.

Keywords: Film semiotics/film semiology, cinematic narrativity, modern cinema, forms of representation

In 1966, taking part in a wide debate promoted by the Cahiers du cinéma, Christian Metz penned an insightful analysis of modern cinema. At the time, ‘The Modern Cinema and Narrativity’ represented one of the most powerful attempts to inject some of the concerns and categories proper to the then-developing field of film semiotics into the body of film criticism. Two years later the essay was included in Metz’s first book, Essais sur la signification au cinéma, in a section entirely devoted to ‘modern’ cinema (quotation marks appeared in the title of the section).1 Included in the section were also ‘Mirror Construction in Fellini’s 8½’ (previously published

in *Revue d’esthétique* in 1966) and ‘The Saying and the Said: Towards the Decline of Plausibility in Cinema?’ (a speech given at a roundtable during the Pesaro Film Festival in 1967, then rewritten for a special issue of the journal *Communications*). The triptych deserves a re-visititation: it bears witness to one of the rare attempts by Metz, and by the first generation of semioticians more broadly, to come to terms with film history, and consequently to test the theoretical framework of the discipline. It results in a rich and flexible picture, which also outlines some of the future developments of film semiotics. In the golden era of structuralism, Metz, facing contemporary cinema, develops an approach and a set of categories that will play a great role in the following years.

**The Newness of ‘New Cinema’**

What characterizes modern cinema? The entire first part of ‘The Modern Cinema and Narrativity’ is dedicated to a discussion of the characteristics that critics attribute to contemporary cinema: ‘Everyone agrees in recognizing the new cinema as defined by the fact that it “has gone beyond” or “rejected” or “broken down” something.' The new cinema is new because it has traits opposed to the traditional ones: it overturns them and goes beyond them. Through an attentive and systematic reading of the ongoing debate around new cinema, Metz identifies nine of these ‘traits’ and asks if they are indeed useful for defining modern cinema.

First of all, new cinema is said to reject any ties with spectacle: it is allergic to the traditional rituals of consumption as well as to traditional forms of representation. What it wants is to be and to feel free. Second, new cinema is seen as dismissing any form of mise-en-scène; it is, and it wants to be, quite far from theatre, yet it also wants to pay attention, and even adhere directly, to the depicted events. Third, it refuses to follow a prewritten script and instead relies on improvisation. Fourth, it repudiates...
traditional dramaturgy, renouncing a compact and continuous narrative in favour of numerous ‘dead’ spaces. Fifth, according to most critics, ‘the new cinema should be defined as a more direct approach to the real’ as opposed to having an inclination toward fiction and narrative machinations. Sixth, new cinema is a ‘film-maker’s cinema’, as opposed to the old ‘script-writer’s cinema’. Seventh: ‘the modern cinema [is] a cinema of the “shot”, as distinguished from the old cinema, which was more concerned with racing from shot to shot, straight to the sequence’. Eighth, according to Pasolini, modern cinema leans toward poetry more than toward prose; it is not a plain illustration of a set of events but a report filtered through a subjective sensibility. Ninth and finally, modern cinema is characterized by ‘the noticeable presence of the camera[,] whereas, in traditional films, on the contrary, the camera tried to make its presence unfelt, to make itself invisible before the spectacle it was presenting’.

Critics tend to attribute one or more of these traits to new cinema, but Metz disagrees with this characterization:

Spectacle and nonspectacle, theatre and nontheatre, improvised and controlled cinema, dramatization and nondramatization, basic realism and contrivance, film-maker’s cinema and script-writer’s cinema, shot cinema and sequence cinema, prose cinema and poetic cinema, the camera-in-presence and the invisible camera: None of these distinctions seems to me to account for the specific character of modern cinema.

There are two reasons behind Metz’s dissatisfaction. First, there is the question of content: these traits seem to be confused and often contradictory. They are difficult to define, and they are often countered by the presence of other characteristics. Take, for example, the inclination towards realism: new cinema is also ‘a cinema of premeditation and indirection [...] that believes only in reconstructed truths’, as exemplified by the films of Alain Resnais. Then there is the question of method: Metz does not directly address this, but it is deducible from his approach. The nine conceptual pairs are not true oppositions and do not pass the characteristically structuralist operation of the commutation test. The presence of the first trait should

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5 Ibid., p. 194.
6 Ibid., p. 201.
7 Ibid., p. 203.
8 Ibid., p. 207 (emphasis in original).
9 Ibid., p. 208.
10 Ibid., p. 199.
define classical or traditional cinema, while the second should characterize contemporary cinema. In reality, however, ‘[i]n each one of these conceptual pairs, the feature claimed as “modern” is too often found in the films of yesterday and too often is lacking in the films of today’.\textsuperscript{11} As a result, it is impossible to construct two clear categories of film.

How can this impasse be overcome? Metz calls upon semiotics and narratology. Many critics suggest that new cinema refuses the story, and more broadly speaking, lacks grammatical and syntactic rules. Metz takes another position: instead of claiming that modern cinema is ‘less’ narrative than the classical one, he puts forward the idea that it is ‘more’ narrative. ‘[The conceptual pairs] are so many partial expressions of a same underlying idea: That in the past the cinema was entirely narrative and no longer is so today, or is so at least to a much lesser extent. I believe on the contrary that the modern film is more narrative, and more satisfyingly so, and that the main contribution of the new cinema is to have enriched the filmic narrative.’\textsuperscript{12} The same could be said about the grammatical and syntactic rules.\textsuperscript{13} Films which belong to modern cinema, ‘far from demonstrating the nonexistence of the “syntax”, […] are really discovering new syntactic regions while remaining (at least as long as they are intelligible, as is the case almost always) entirely submissive to the functional requirements of filmic discourse’\textsuperscript{14}. Hence the necessity of studying new cinema from a more analytical perspective: its novelty resides not in a reversal of previous characteristics but in a certain number of linguistic constructions.

\textbf{A New Syntagma: The ‘Potential Sequence’}

Metz highlights two aspects of this novelty. On the one hand, he inquires into the presence of new linguistic procedures, and especially of a new kind of syntagma, which he calls \textit{potential sequence}. On the other hand, he focuses on the extension of the possibilities of ‘saying’ something – the extension of the “sayable” or of the “representable”. Modern cinema is typified by a capacity to go beyond the usual narrative conventions and beyond

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 208.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 208.
\textsuperscript{13} It is worth recalling that, according Metz, ‘cinema has \textit{never} had either a grammar or a syntax in the precise linguistic sense of these terms’, and yet ‘there are a certain number of structural configurations that are in actual fact laws and whose details are constantly evolving’. Metz, ‘Modern Cinema’, pp. 209-10.
\textsuperscript{14} Metz, ‘Modern Cinema’, p. 211.
the usual representational boundaries – without denying the presence of rules to be followed.

Let’s start with the potential sequence. In the same year (1966) that Metz published ‘The Modern Cinema’, he also wrote one of his most famous essays, ‘La grande syntagmatique du film narratif’, in which he defined a chart of the essential narrative structures. ‘I have identified, from the origins of the cinema to the present, only a limited number (eight) of large basic syntagmatic types.’ The more recent cinema – well exemplified by Godard and a film like Pierrot le fou (F/I 1965) – elaborates new kinds of syntagma that are not included in the previous chart. In particular, there are aggregates of shots which include actions that take place before or after the depicted event, and sometimes that could have taken place, but whose actuality remains uncertain. This new syntagma breaks the temporal consecutiveness, the spatial coexistence, the sense of repetition, the parallelism of two actions, and so on that define the traditional forms of narrativity; moreover, it challenges the certainty of the representation, merging what really happens in the story with what could have happened. Hence its name, potential sequence (séquence potentielle), a portion of discourse in which we face side by side both an accomplished action and a conceivable event, and in which we must consider both aspects as components of the same whole. The potential sequence is a sort of paradox: it mixes two different levels of diegesis, the actual and the virtual; it overlaps them, avoiding any clear distinction, as if they were the two sides of a coin; and it gives them full expression – both of them, the actual and the virtual, are fully enunciated – in their difference and in their reversibility.

Through this type of segment, a film keeps telling a story. ‘[The potential sequence is] an undetermined sequence that represents a new type of syntagma, a novel form of the “logic of montage”, but that remains entirely a figure of narrativity.’ Simply, the film can develop a new form of sensibility. Metz reminds us of the Proustian distinction between two forms of intelligence: to penetrate a situation means to grasp all its sides, the whole of what actually happens; to predict it means to be able to envision also what could have happened and what could happen, the whole of the possibilities. The potential sequence opens the filmic narrative to the second front; it

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15 The text first appeared in Communications, 8 (1966), pp. 120-24 (the issue was devoted to The Structural Analysis of Narrative); then, merged with two other texts, it was published as ‘Problèmes de dénotation dans le film de fiction’, in Essais, I, pp. 111-48, translated as ‘Problems of Denotation in Fiction Film’, in Film Language, pp. 114-33.
17 Ibid., p. 219 (emphasis in original).
Francesco Casetti gives the story a new chance – the chance that modern cinema is inclined to explore.

I want to add just two notes. This idea of ‘potentiality’ that Metz connects to a new kind of syntagma also emerges in other passages of ‘The Modern Cinema and Narrativity’. In particular, discussing the alleged ‘nondramatization’ of modern cinema, Metz praises Michelangelo Antonioni for his ability ‘to gather together within the skein of a more subtle dramaturgy all those lost significations of which our days are made. Even more: that he was able to prevent them from being entirely lost, without, however, marshaling them.’¹⁸ The potentiality is exactly this: the capacity of keeping alive what is otherwise lost – because it is no more or not yet actual – without concealing the very fact that what is kept has not been fully realized.¹⁹

Second, the potential sequence is not the only narrative construction that characterizes modern cinema. Metz also mentions the presence of the still photograph, the use of the off-screen voice, or written titles – not by chance all moments in which the linear flow of the story is suspended, and the depicted event either overlaps with other kinds of components, like a character’s thoughts and the author’s commentary, or is kept on hold, ready to transform itself into something qualitatively different. The sense of potentiality permeates modern cinema.

A New Dimension: Beyond Plausibility

The ‘potential’ and the ‘possible’ as specific traits of modern cinema also come to the fore in ‘The Saying and the Said: Towards the Decline of Plausibility in Cinema?’. What characterizes new cinema is its desire to ‘say’, and to ‘say’ everything: ‘The “new” film-maker does not look for a film subject: he has something to say, and so he says it in film.’²⁰ From its inception, cinema has been nourished by the ‘mad hope’ of expressing whatever was necessary and useful: if this ‘mad hope’ is still far from being realized, ‘[n] evertheless, in the newer accents, which are more real and more diversified

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 194 (emphasis in original). Metz synthesizes this process saying that Antonioni ‘was able to preserve [the lost significations] without “finding” them’ (p. 194).
¹⁹ We could say that Godard’s ‘potential sequences’ and Antonioni’s ‘empty moments’ deal with virtuality in two different and yet comparable ways: the potential sequences ‘merge’ actual events and occurrences that could have happened; the empty moments ‘suspend’ the course of the actual events, and thanks to such a suspension they let emerge sides – and meanings – that could have been attached to the story.
than those of the great films of the past, of the best recent films, the cinema is beginning to accept the challenge of that hope.\(^{21}\)

In order to reach such a goal, cinema must fight three kinds of censorship: the first censorship, in the hands of State, watches over the moral contents of a movie; the second, in the hands of industry, impedes what is not profitable; the third, more subtle, consists in a sort of auto-limitation by film-makers ‘who, once and for all, have stopped trying (or have never tried) to break out of the narrow circle of recommended topics for films’.\(^{22}\) This third censorship discloses the existence of ‘an insidious restriction of filmic possibilities’: in representing reality, cinema almost automatically chooses what is considered most effective, believable, acceptable, and so on, according to society’s expectations and habits. In a word, cinema chooses what is plausible and tends to exclude the rest. ‘The arts of representation [...] do not represent all that is possible – all the possibles – but only the plausible possible.’\(^{23}\)

Metz reminds us that Aristotle defines it as ‘that which is possible in the eyes of common opinion’; in the French literary theories of the 17th century, it becomes ‘everything that conforms to the laws of an established genre’.\(^{24}\) According to this definition, the Plausible is what a discourse is ready to endorse, because it corresponds either with the audience’s beliefs or with a genre’s norms. It is an accepted or an approved possible, and as such, it also implies the very fact that other possibilities that are neither accepted nor approved also exist – yet are not considered possibilities at all, because they lie outside what public opinion or genres consider permissible to represent. ‘Thus, from its inception, the Plausible is a reduction of the possible; it is an arbitrary and cultural restriction of real possibles; it is, in fact, censorship. Among all the possibilities of figurative fiction, only those authorized by previous discourse will be “chosen”.’\(^{25}\)

Metz adds that the Plausible provides a restriction especially at the level of the way in which something is said. What is kept under control

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 236.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 237.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 238 (emphases in original).
\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 239 (emphasis in original). Metz adds: ‘Thus, behind the institutional censorship of films, around it, beside it – beneath it, but larger than it – the censorship of the Plausible functions as a second barrier, as a filter that is invisible but is more insidious than the openly acknowledged censures; it bears on all subjects, whereas institutional censorship is concentrated around only a few political and “moral” aspects; it controls – and that is the worst thing about it – not exactly the subjects themselves, but the way the subjects are handled, that is to say, the very content of films [...]’. ‘The Saying and the Said’, pp. 241-42 (emphasis in original).
is not so much the substance of content – a topic – but rather the form of content, the manner in which the topic is represented.\textsuperscript{26} In any case, the Plausible does not let all the possibilities come into full existence; it includes only some of them, while excluding what is not endorsed in the sphere of social discourses. In this sense, it is defined by the presence of borders: ‘the Plausible [...] resides in the very existence of a line of division, in the actual act of the restriction of possibilities’. It is a closed domain: ‘Always and everywhere the work that is bogged down in pure Plausibility is a closed work, and it adds no new possibility to the “corpus” of previous works in the same genre and in the same civilization.’\textsuperscript{27}

And yet the fence can be breached. Such is the case with modern cinema: in trying to say everything, the new film-makers prove to be able to capture what was previously excluded from the domain of filmic representations. Hence a sense of openness: ‘[T]he work that is partially freed from the Plausible is an open work, a work that, here and there, enacts or re-enacts one of the possibilities of life (if it is a “realistic” work) or of the imagination (if it is a “fantastic” or “non-realistic” work), whose previous exclusion through the plausibility of earlier works had succeeded in losing it from memory.’\textsuperscript{28} In other words, new cinema’s task is to redeem what was lost and make possible what was impossible. The number of choices in the ‘sayable’, previously reduced, is now expanded, and new topics and new ways of representing them become available. It is not a move without costs. To break the borders of the Plausible, to open its domain, calls for a considerable effort; an effort to utter things that have never been said: ‘[T]here adheres an enormous weight that must be raised by whoever wants to say them first. The sayer’s task is double therefore: In addition to the always considerable labour of saying things, he must also somehow say their exclusion from other sayings.’\textsuperscript{29} New cinema on the one hand provides an increase of possibilities; on the other, it raises meta-linguistic awareness, which ends the taking of these possibilities for granted and develops a self-conscious use

\textsuperscript{26} Metz directly refers to Louis Hjelmslev (see Metz: ‘The Saying and the Said’, p. 242, note 3). In short, Hjelmslev defines the \textit{substance} as the stuff that lies under both the content plane (i.e. our thoughts) and the expression plane (i.e. sound in spoken language); the substance must be ‘cut’ in single portions in order to create single concepts and single phonemes; the \textit{form} is precisely the specific way (specific to any culture and any language) in which substance is ‘cut’, therefore providing the speaker a set of distinct possibilities. According this definition, the Plausible is a form of content (a way of creating internal and external borders relative to the substance of content).

\textsuperscript{27} Metz, ‘The Saying and the Said’, p. 245.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 246.
of representation. (I would add, as parenthesis, that this meta-linguistic awareness is precisely what Metz praises in Federico Fellini’s 8½ [I/F 1963] in his essay ‘Mirror Construction in Fellini’s 8½’).

The very act of giving a chance to what was otherwise only an unexpressed possibility triggers not only a sense of novelty – ‘a shock in the viewer’\(^{30}\) – but also a sense of truth.\(^{31}\) The occurrence of what was unseen brings the feeling of a discovery or a revelation. ‘[E]ach time it occurs it renders forty films, retroactively devoted to the pure Plausible, obsolete in a single stroke.’\(^{32}\) And yet this revelation soon becomes something that is accepted and even expected: ‘[…] the truths of today can become the plausibilities of tomorrow’. What was a fresh and candid insight into reality and fantasy – that brought to fore new content and a new way of representing it – soon becomes a rhetorical device.

The impression of truth, of a sudden liberation, corresponds to those privileged moments when the Plausible is burst open by some new point, or when a new possibility makes its appearance in the film; but once established, this possibility in turn becomes a fact of discourse and of “writing”, and hence the germ at least of a new Plausibility.\(^{33}\)

The novelty loses its strength; I would say, instead of being the ‘arising-of-a-possible’, it becomes a ‘taken-for-granted-possible’. The field of possibilities is flattened again.

**The Potential and the Possible**

How do ‘The Modern Cinema and Narrativity’ and ‘The Saying and the Said’ (and partially ‘Mirror Construction in Fellini’s 8½’) interact and converse?

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) I would note that the meaning of the French word, *vraisemblable*, implies the idea of truth and at the same time the idea of seeming. The *vraisemblable* is not what is true but what looks true. In the same years in which Metz penned his contribution, A.J. Greimas was designing an even more complex layout: besides the Truth and the Plausibility, we also have to take in account the Veracity, i.e. the ability to say the truth. Hence a triplets of concepts: the being-true, the seeming-true, and the saying-true (in French: *Vérité, Vraisemblance, Véridiction*, that we can properly translate as the True, the Verisimilar, and the Veridictive). See A.J. Greimas, ‘The Veridiction Contract’, trans. by Frank Collins and others, *New Literary History*, 20/3 (1989), pp. 651-60; or ‘Le contrat de véridiction’, *Man and World*, 13 (1980), pp. 345-55.


\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 247.
How do they explore and set up the field of the Potential and the Possible? The idea of the ‘potential sequence’ and the breach of the Plausible trace two parallel and yet different processes.

In the first case of the potential sequence, we deal with something that is already in the domain of diegetic possibilities but that is not expected to appear on the screen because the story has followed another course of events. The potential sequence overturns this expectation: an action that could have occurred, if something else had not taken its place, is nevertheless represented on the screen, together with that which actually occurred. What we encounter is a sort of ‘suspended’ element that enters the film narrative. The potential sequence outlines what is suspended; what could have happened is staged along with what really happens. Consequently, the virtual and the actual meet; both are realized in the discourse. There is no more suspension, everything can occur at the same time – the now includes the no more, the not yet, the coming soon, the almost. Impending actions, lost opportunities, real behaviour all mingle.

In the second case we go far beyond what belongs to the sphere of diegesis, what is just suspended, or placed on hold. We deal with something that is not part of the domain of the authorized filmic representations either because it goes against common sense or because it falls outside the rules of the genre. Hence, what a film shows is not simply an action or a character that is not expected to be on the screen, because another course of events had taken its place, but an action or a character that, according to the social and linguistic norms, cannot – or even must not – be shown. Rather than a suspended element that is made present, we face an unprecedented element that becomes available. The breach of the Plausible overcomes an exclusion – and not simply a suspension. It changes the map of what is sayable, it expands the border of what we can include in our discourses.

In other words, with the potential sequence we mix the possible with the actual, and in this way we allow a film to capture a multilayered state of things; with the breach of Plausibility we authorize what otherwise is excluded – not only from ‘this’ film but also from ‘all’ films – to become ‘sayable’. In both cases, what is not supposed to be on the screen appears in the film as an actual part of it. But the values and the implications of such occurrences are different. In the potential sequence, the possible is something that stays on hold and that becomes actual because a film wants to witness it as well: it is something that already exists in the diegesis and that is ‘hosted’ in the film along with what is presented as an actual course of action. In the breach of the Plausible, the possible is something that comes
to life: what was excluded from the cinema because of its non-conformity with the Plausible – what indeed was a non-existent element – becomes a component that a movie can take into account; it becomes such a component because it occurs in a movie that dares to overcome its exclusion; and once incorporated, this component is ready to be taken up by other films as well, to the point of inevitably slipping from the unexpected to the habitual, and in this way it is reabsorbed into the domain of Plausibility.

The two paths cross but move along different lines. In the first case we are engaged in a process of *aggregation* of different states and stages of an event. As I said above, the potential sequence is a segment that encompasses what happens, what is to happen, what just happened, and what could have been happening. It is not by chance that the potential sequence may recall the idea of ‘Crystal-image’ that Gilles Deleuze will foreground in his work on cinema. The Crystal-image is formed by the collision of present, past, and future as well as of perception, memory, and anticipation; in it, the actual and the virtual crash and merge, becoming indiscernible. In this respect, the Crystal-image is a perfect specimen of time as duration: ‘What we see in crystal is time in itself, a bit of time in the pure state.’34

In the case of the breach of the Plausible, we face instead a process of *re-articulation* of a semantic field. The borders that define the great domain of what can legitimately be represented move outward and inward; what was previously forbidden becomes acceptable, and what was acceptable becomes obsolete; novelties open breaches and then are seen as standard; the geography of vision is remapped. And new images – new realities, new meanings – become available, while others lose their force and legitimation. Not by chance, this process aligns with cinema’s work of a re-configuration of the visible, which many scholars claim is the most specific and precious legacy of cinema. (Among these scholars is Pietro Montani, who works with great analytical detail on this topic.)35 Cinema is precisely the art that has ceaselessly redefined the visibility of the world: in film after film, things shown on the screen and the way in which they were displayed have made some portions of reality accessible for spectators, while at the same time excluding other parts. A possibility ready to be manifested, and a possibility that is not yet or no longer included in the set of possibilities – let’s say possibilities still invisible – have found, on the screen, a permanent site of confrontation and mutual exchange.

Beyond Structuralism, and Toward a History of Forms

Metz’s interest in the Potential and the Possible has significant consequences for his theoretical framework. At the heart of an epoch devoted to Structuralism, Metz moves against some of the axioms that underpin its approach. In particular, Metz dismantles two main principles: first, the idea of a clear divide between paradigmatic axis and syntagmatic axis; and second, the primacy (and the relative stability) of a system.

Structuralism provides an oppositional definition of paradigm and syntagm. A paradigm is a set of linguistic items that form mutually exclusive choices; it is the site of a selection. On the contrary, a syntagm is a set of linguistic units that have been chosen by the speaker in order to create a discourse: it is the site of a combination. The passage from the paradigm to the syntagm is the passage from a linguistic system to a linguistic manifestation – the passage from a domain of virtuality to a domain of realizations. The ‘potential’ syntagma spoils this picture: it breaks the rigidity of this divide, and conceives the discourse as a site where the actual can coexist with the virtual – a virtual that is realized, since it enters into the discourse, but whose realization does not strip it of its status of virtuality. Hence a new and richer dynamic: a discourse can host what is otherwise on hold; and the paradigmatic can break into the syntagm, still keeping its status as paradigmatic. It is not a simple superposition of principles, as with the ‘poetic function’ described by Roman Jakobson, in which the linearity of the discourse is punctuated by contrasts and repetitions proper to the syntagmatic organizations.36 On the contrary, it is the ultimate attempt by the discourse to escape the need for a limited – and limiting – choice and also to include possibilities within it. It is in this manner that the ‘potential sequence’ can depict not only what happens but an ‘idea’ of an event that also includes what could have happened – the virtual and the actual together.

As for the ‘primacy’ of the system, Structuralism claims that linguistic activity is mainly – and typically – based on a passage from a set of pre-established possibilities to a realization; it is the system that determines the discourse. The breach of the Plausible changes the picture: the discourse creates possibilities that later are included in the system. Modern cinema shows pieces of reality that are outside the usual things that a film is expected to represent. Once shown in a movie, the representation of this piece

of reality becomes legitimately available also for other movies. Therefore, the usual set of choices that films can refer to is implemented; but it is implemented thanks to a filmic realization – through a bottom-up and not a top-down process. In short, the discourse inflects the system, instead of the system governing the discourse. Or, put in another way, it is the ‘said’ of a film that defines the ‘sayable’ of cinema, and not the ‘sayable’ that determines the ‘said’.

I would like to add that such a primacy of realization – and not of system – echoes the first great Metz essay, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ written in 1964,\(^{37}\) in which he claimed that cinema rests upon a language that is developing from film to film more than upon an already well-established system of signs. The same primacy will re-emerge in the last pages of \textit{Language and Cinema}, written in 1971,\(^{38}\) in which the idea of ‘writing’ elucidates the fact that a film constantly ‘reworks’ the codes that underlie its manifestation, to the point of ‘restructuring’ the pre-existing system of choices. Metz perpetually worked – and often in advance – with a semiotics far from the rigidity of Structuralism.

There is a second and final issue tied in with the picture sketched by Metz. It is not by chance that it emerges in conjunction with a study of modern cinema: a historical approach highlights the richness of the ways the films are put together and their dialectic relationships with the pre-existing set of authorized choices. From this viewpoint, Metz synthesizes the novelty of ‘new’ cinema as follows:

Rather than some cataclysmic ‘breakdown’ of filmic syntax, we are witnessing with the new cinema a vast and complex trend of renewal and enrichment, which is expressed by three parallel developments: (1) Certain figures are for the time being more or less abandoned (example: slow motion or accelerated motion filming); (2) others are maintained, but as more flexible variations, which must not prevent one from recognizing the permanence of a deeper semiological mechanism (example: the shot/reverse shot, the scene, the sequence, alternate montage, etc.); (3) finally, new figures evolve, increasing the cinema’s possibilities of expression.\(^{39}\)


\(^{39}\) Metz, ‘Modern Cinema’, p. 217.
This passage is quite important: here Metz opens the doors to what David Bordwell would call a History of Film Styles.\(^{40}\) And yet Metz follows a path that is different from Bordwell’s, despite some similarities. To him, such a history is not a simple list of the main formulas and procedures in use at a given moment. On the contrary, it includes what is customary but also what is outmoded, what is a variation of current norms, and what is a novelty in search of legitimization. To grasp such a landscape, we must keep in mind the dialectical relationships between manifestation and language system as well as the determining role of manifestation. It does not suffice to describe what films do in one epoch; we have to uncover what they are ready to do, what they are able to do, what they do not want to do anymore — according to a set of opportunities that are always expandable, also on the impulse provided by realizations.

Once again, the idea of the Possible and the Potential displays its full relevance: it is thanks to it that we can trace such a flexible and dynamic landscape. The Possible and the Potential provide the horizon within which each option takes place: they represent the reserve of opportunities that a movie may refer to. In one word: they give a ‘thickness’ to the picture, making evident that a style is not only a spread mode of expression but overall something that comes to life in the interval between what is in use and what can be in use.

In this vein, we understand better the strategy that Metz deployed in his research and that is even clearer in the pages we have reread here. What he constantly praised — and in his discussion on the modern openly practiced — was a double insight: on the one hand, general semiotics provides a trans-historical picture that highlights the general conditions proper to cinema; on the other hand, analyses of specific corpuses enable researchers to see how the general conditions fit and adapt to an actual context. There is a ‘theory’ that orients and sustains examinations, and there is a set of ‘cases’ that test, endorse, or readjust the ‘theory’.\(^{41}\) Research must go back and forth between the two poles: the first emphasizes the background of a manifestation; the second represents the site that implements the sphere of choices. Hence the usefulness of the go-between the actual and the virtual: it gives a full perspective to both sides. This is the great lesson that Metzian semiotics imparted. This is its legacy.


About the author

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