Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

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The Cinematic Signifier and the Imaginary

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Abstract

Christian Metz’s concept of the ‘imaginary signifier’ is in some sense oxymoronic. Metz claims that the signifier in cinema is absent, but this assertion rests on conflating the signifier and the referent. This chapter links these contradictions to Metz’s continuing allegiance to the notion of the image as defined in the phenomenological approaches of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Here, the image is defined primarily by an analogy with the real. Lacan, by contrast, situated the image as a conjunction of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The author’s analysis extends beyond the mirror stage essay to describe a relation of the subject to the image that is more productive for an understanding of cinematic space and time.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, psychoanalytic theory of cinema, imaginary signifier, visual analogy, image theory, phenomenology

The image has consistently confronted semiotics as a dilemma. Is it a sign even though it lacks the arbitrariness that Ferdinand de Saussure pinpointed as one of the sign’s essential qualities? What is its relation to the phoneme (the smallest contrastive unit without meaning in language) and the moneme (the smallest meaningful linguistic unit), and can one isolate in it a double articulation? But even prior to this interrogation, one must address the question ‘What is an image?’ Its relation to materiality fluctuates with its usage, since an image can refer to an iconic object such as a painting, an indexical and iconic object such as a photograph or frame of a film, or a purely mental image as in a daydream (or in literature). The painting and the photograph have a certain consistency or materiality – they can be touched or held in the hand. The image in film is more fleeting,
evanescent and although theoretically it can be touched (as a photogram), it is not experienced this way in reception. Least material of all would be the mental image – unlocalizable and ephemeral, an image that was of particular interest to phenomenology. In addition, in optics an image can be real or virtual.

An image can hence be conceptualized from a number of points of view as occupying a position on the threshold of semiotics. Christian Metz, in his early phenomenological work, in his analysis of cinema in relation to linguistics and semiotics, and in his later psychoanalytic approach, struggled with the image’s resistance to dissection, its adherence to its referent, and hence its refusal to be reduced to a signifying function. Part of the difficulty of the image, for Metz, was the role of analogy in specifying the image’s relation to its referent. The image was the object’s Doppelgänger, its quasi-presence, its likeness, its twin. Unlike the word, it could not be wrested away from its referent, which it always seems to carry with it. In Language and Cinema, Metz resolved the problem by making imagistic representation (as in the cinema) analogous to everyday visual perception, both of which he claimed were coded (and culturally variable). Codes of analogy are ‘systems of great anthropological importance’ and ‘operate in view of “resemblance”’, causing the ‘resembling object to be felt as such’.

This naturalizing effect, however, raised the spectre of phenomenology for Metz because the closeness of filmic perception to everyday perception meant that the visual recognition of objects in film (a feature of its iconicity) was not cinematically specific (being a characteristic of other systems such as painting, photography, and television – indeed, of any figurative system). In his 1975 ‘Le perçu et le nommé’ (‘The perceived and the named’), Metz calls for a new form of research on the dispositifs-passerelles (‘bridging apparatuses’) that make possible a network of relations between language and the image that are entirely interiorized by a culture, so much so that the phenomenologists were ‘able to describe them as spontaneous (and they are in effect)’. That notion of spontaneity in phenomenology is resistant to the operation of coding, but for Metz, this is ultimately resolvable by situating phenomenology as ideological, as complicit in the naturalizing effect of ideology. However, as Metz moves on in his work to psychoanalysis,
the crucial analytic problem is no longer the image, as in phenomenology, nor the code as in semiotics, but the Lacanian concept of the imaginary as a psychical repository of imagos and identifications. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate here, phenomenological notions of analogy and of the image as a ‘quasi-presence’ of the object continue to maintain a strong hold on Metz’s thinking.3

Metz’s crucial essay, ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, constitutes itself as a formidable struggle between the psychoanalytic orders of the imaginary, associated with a kind of cinephilia, and the symbolic, the realm of analysis and theory. The imaginary emerges as above all a lure, a trap, an enemy that must be conquered by an ascent to knowledge: ‘Any psychoanalytic reflection on the cinema might be defined in Lacanian terms as an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic, in the hope of extending the latter by a new province.’4 The aggressivity of the language is clear: the imaginary is ‘the site of an unsurpassable opacity’; it is ‘essential to tear the symbolic from its own imaginary’; one must ‘avoid being swallowed up by it: a never-ending task’.5 Accompanying this anxiety toward incorporation by the imaginary is a recognition that psychoanalysis inevitably undermines the scientism and taxonomy fever that consistently attracted Metz. Affect – love, cinephilia, fascination, fantasy, and desire – inflect his analysis more here than elsewhere in his writing, threatening intermittently to topple his epistemological structure. It could be said that this text is haunted by a form of paranoia (one of the aspects of paranoia, as Freud tells us, is the compulsion to build systems). For Metz, the cinematic apparatus, understood as system, acts as a defense against this violent threat posed by cinema’s affinity with the imaginary.

In all of his major works – Language and Cinema (1971), The Imaginary Signifier (1977), and L’énonciation impersonnelle (1991) – Metz lodges his thinking within the inadequacies of an analogy. As Tom Conley has pointed out, these are all works ‘built upon an analogy destined to fail’.6 Cinema is like a language, and yet not; the cinematic apparatus is analogous to the

3 For a very detailed and illuminating analysis of Metz’s relation to phenomenology from his early work through his later psychoanalytic research, see Dominique Chateau and Martin Lefebvre, ‘Dance and Fetish: Phenomenology and Metz’s Epistemological Shift’, October, 148 (2014), pp. 103-32.
5 Ibid., p. 4.
psyche, but not in every respect; cinema is an enunciation and nevertheless lacks its defining dialogic structures of ‘you’ and ‘I’. ‘The Imaginary Signifier’ is perhaps most resistant to an acknowledgment of the analogy’s failure, and Metz’s attempt to view cinema as the incarnation of the psyche (however understood) has a long and venerable history, from Hugo Münsterberg to Edgar Morin and beyond. For Morin, ‘It is not pure chance if the language of psychology and that of the cinema often coincide in terms of projection, representation, field, and images. Film is constructed in the likeness of our total psyche.’ Dreams, imaginings, representations constitute ‘this little cinema that we have in our head’: Analogy provides both the infrastructure of Metz’s theory and, in many respects, its focus and dilemma. For, despite its deflection onto the notion of the signifier, the problem that always faces Metz, from his early phenomenologically inspired work to his later embrace of linguistics and psychoanalysis, is the concept of an image that differs from a sign insofar as its major operation is analogy. The image is also ‘like’ what it records, only different. It sticks too closely to its referent.

What is an ‘imaginary signifier’? Given the fact that the signifier is the part of the sign that adheres most closely to materiality and that Jacques Lacan insistently situated it in relation to the symbolic, the phrase strikes one as an oxymoron. It might be helpful to break down the conjunction of these terms and ask, on the one hand, what Metz meant by ‘imaginary’, and on the other, what he meant by ‘signifier’. In Metz’s differentiation of the types of psychoanalysis of cinema (psychobiography, psychoanalysis of the script, etc.) it becomes clear that the privileged psychoanalysis is that of the signifier. Here the signifier comes to represent form or the medium specificity of cinema (‘the signifier of cinema as such’, and cinema is distinguished from individual films). The most striking aspect of cinema, in Metz’s view, is its unprecedented perceptual wealth (in opposition to literature, music, painting, sculpture). But in order to differentiate cinema from theatre or opera, similarly wealthy, there must be something else at stake and this is, precisely, the image, the fact of a recording, whether photographic or phonic. The real bodies of the actors in theatre or opera occupy a real, present space. In cinema,

everything is recorded (as a memory trace which is immediately so, without having been something else before) [...]. For it is the signifier itself, and as a whole, that is recorded, that is absence [...]. [...] In the

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cinema it is not just the fictional signified, if there is one, that is thus made present in the mode of absence, it is from the outset the signifier.\(^8\)

There is no doubt that Metz has isolated a critical difference between cinema and the other arts, but his insistence upon the term ‘signifier’ is perplexing. Signifier here denotes that which is filmed, since it is this, the profilmic reality, that is truly absent. If the signifier is the image or images, they are certainly present. The signifier, by definition, must be present as the configurations of lightness and darkness, colour and sound, there, with the spectator in the auditorium. What Metz refers to as the absent signifier, defining it in terms of its absence, must instead be the referent. For even the signified, at least in Saussurean terms, must be present, adhering to the signifier like the recto and verso of a piece of paper. Metz’s confusion of the terms signifier, signified, and referent resonates with Saussure’s own difficulties. For, as Emile Benveniste has argued, when Saussure insists upon the arbitrary relation between the signer and signified, he is really thinking of the referent, not the signified: ‘It is clear that the argument is falsified by an unconscious and surreptitious reference to a third term that was not included in the initial definition. The third term is the thing itself, the reality.’\(^9\) Saussure contradicts himself, since elsewhere (the metaphor of the piece of paper, the thoughts indissociable from signifiers) he insists upon the necessary, not arbitrary, relation between signifier and signified. In Benveniste’s view, the significance of the concept of structure or system is precisely that the relations between its elements are necessary, and the disturbance of one element disturbs the entire system. The fact that it is the relation between sign and referent that is arbitrary simply means that the referent must be excluded from the start, situated outside the system. Metz finds this very difficult to do since his analysis depends upon the real in various ways (e.g. the notion that the actor is really there in the theatre and not in the cinema).\(^10\)

\(^8\) Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, pp. 43-44.
\(^10\) The concept of the referent plays a major role in another psychoanalytically inflected text of Metz’s as well, ‘Metaphor/Metonymy, or the Imaginary Referent’, in The Imaginary Signifier, pp. 150-297. Here, Metz insists on the crucial nature of the distinction between the syntagmatic/paradigmatic opposition and the metonymy/metaphor opposition, based on his idea that metaphor and metonymy point to similarities and contingencies in relation to referents outside the discourse, while syntagmatic and paradigmatic are positions within language (borrowing from Roman Jakobson). With respect to the metaphor ‘That man is an ass’, for instance, Metz claims: ‘I have perceived or felt a resemblance between an animal and a certain
This argument that Metz misuses the term ‘signifier’ would be merely academic if it did not have important repercussions for his theory, and, in particular, for his use of the concepts of ‘analogy’ and ‘image’. Elsewhere in Metz’s work, before the entry of psychoanalysis, the image also coincides with what it denotes. In a footnote to ‘Cinema: langue ou langage?’, he claims that the term image ‘can designate either the shot (as opposed to the sequence) or the filmed subject (as opposed to the shot, which is already the product of an initial composing or arrangement.).’ Here, the image becomes both signifier and referent. And later in this same essay, he claims,

The image is first and always an image. In its perceptual literalness it reproduces the signified spectacle whose signifier it is; and thus it becomes what it shows, to the extent that it does not have to signify it [...].

What is ‘perceptual literalness’? I will return to this in a moment but for now suffice it to say that these passages bear a striking resemblance to Jean-Paul Sartre’s and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological description of the image. For Sartre, the material of a sign does not partake of its object – it is completely indifferent to it (as in the linguistic sign). But there is a special relationship between an image and its object – one of analogy or resemblance: ‘The matter of our image, when we look at a portrait, is not only that tangle of lines and colours that I just called it in the interest of simplicity. It is, actually, a quasi-person, with a quasi-face, etc.’ Merleau-Ponty, echoing and extending Sartre, states:

type of man. This resemblance applies to the actual phenomena and not the language, but it has nevertheless modified my sentence, because I have said “ass” and not “fool.” (p. 187). He goes on to point to the circularity of the relations between reference and discourse (hence, the ‘imaginary referent’), but the figures of metaphor and metonymy are nonetheless grounded in the referent in their distinction from the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic. Lacan recognizes no such distinction and, for him, language is itself generative of such ideas of resemblance. While the concept of the real is crucial for Lacan, it is never a function of the referents of individual signs. Metz is very reluctant to relinquish the concept of the referent.

This misuse is particularly significant since Metz was meticulously precise, throughout his work, in his use of terms and construction of systems. This precision is especially visible in his writing on semiotics.

In a singular way the image incarnates and makes appear the person represented in it, as spirits are made to appear at a séance [a metaphor also used by Sartre]. Even an adult will hesitate to step on an image or photograph; if he does, it will be with aggressive intent. Thus not only is the consciousness of the image slow in developing and subject to relapses, but even for the adult the image is never a simple reflection of the model; it is, rather, its ‘quasi-presence’ (Sartre).  

Neither Sartre nor Merleau-Ponty is interested in making distinctions between a painted portrait and a photograph. But Metz certainly is, since the material base of film is photographic. Nevertheless, he follows the lead of Sartre, and ‘perceptual literalness’ refers to the operation of a spectral analogy. In ‘Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film’, Metz defines analogy in a way that anticipates the slippage in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’ between signifier, signified, and referent: ‘The motivation [of the cinematic sign] is furnished by analogy – that is to say, by the perceptual similarity between the signifier and the signified. This is equally true for the soundtrack (the sound of a cannon on film resembles a real cannon sound) as for the image track (the image of a dog is like the dog).’ Metz insists here on treating the image as an icon rather than an index. In this sense, the photographic image does not differ from the representational painting. The phenomenon of indexicality, as a function of the very technology of the photographic, is repressed in Metz’s discourse in favour of the work of resemblance, analogy.  

All of this points to an aporia in Metz’s use of the concept ‘signifier’. The signifier is at one time an image, at another a referent. This is not a simple contradiction but the residue of his early embrace of phenomenology, in which the image is a special entity clinging to its referent, indeed, embodying it in some magical way in relation to an intentionality that aims at an absent object. However, phenomenology becomes in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’ the carrier of a delusion. It is nevertheless an appropriate method for describing cinema, because it too is caught up in the web of the imaginary.

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17 In the later ‘Photography and Fetish’, Metz cites Roland Barthes and claims that it is photography that is indexical but that indexicality is reduced in film due to movement. See ‘Photography and Fetish’, *October*, 34 (Fall 1985), 81-90 (pp. 82-83).
18 ‘I will say in consequence that the image is an act that aims in its corporeality at an absent or nonexistent object, through a physical or psychic content that is given not as itself but in the capacity of “analogical representative” of the object aimed at.’ Sartre, *The Imaginary*, p. 20.
For Metz, in a very un-Lacanian way, the description of the object precedes its analysis, and phenomenology can provide that description because it is analogous to cinema – ‘For it is true that the topographical apparatus of the cinema resembles the conceptual apparatus of phenomenology, with the result that the latter can cast light on the former.’ André Bazin is so compelling for Metz because he perfectly describes the operation of the cinema. Yet he is caught up in its imaginary, unable to extricate himself from it, and a psychoanalysis of that operation is crucial to the production of knowledge of the real:

In other words, phenomenology can contribute to knowledge of the cinema (and it has done so) insofar as it happens to be like it, and yet it is on the cinema and phenomenology in their common illusion of perceptual mastery that light must be cast by the real conditions of society and man.

For Metz, as for Louis Althusser, the imaginary is the realm of ideology, and hence it is crucial to accede to the level of the symbolic, where knowledge of the real resides. Yet, the traces of phenomenology in Metz’s theory indicate a constant battle between ontology (What is cinema? What is the cinematic signifier?) and epistemology (How does cinema work? What is its relation to the spectator and his position?).

This brings us to the second term of the equation – the imaginary. The difficulties and contradictions of Metz’s use of the term ‘signifier’ are mirrored (as it were) here. The imaginary, although Metz purports to be using it in the technical psychoanalytic sense, is at some points associated with the purely fictional, with absence (a textual category), and here its opposite is the real; and at other points with identification (a concept associated with the psychoanalytic account of the constitution of the subject, and in this sense it is opposed to the symbolic). As we saw earlier, the cinematic signifier is imaginary because it is (allegedly) absent. Despite the perceptual richness of the cinema, it is haunted by absence. Lacan’s mirror phase is critical for Metz’s argument and he reads its central feature as the play between presence and absence:

19 ‘In any domain, a phenomenology of the object to be understood, a “receptive” description of its appearances, must be the starting point; only afterwards can criticism begin [...]’ Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 53.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid. (emphasis in original).
22 This is a severe deviation from the Lacanian notion of the symbolic, since for Lacan, the symbolic is not equivalent to knowledge.
More than the other arts, or in a more unique way, the cinema involves us in the imaginary: it drums up all perception, but to switch it immediately over into its own absence, which is nonetheless the only signifier present. [...] Thus film is like the mirror.23

As Metz is quick to point out, anything can be reflected in that cinema-mirror except the spectator himself. As in Michel Foucault’s reading of Las Meninas, representation entails that the viewer ‘cannot not be invisible’.24 Cinema must be aligned with the secondary processes of consciousness because the spectator’s ego has already been constituted, long ago, in the relation to the primary mirror. Yet, in Metz’s argument, cinema is inscribed in the wake of the imaginary – in effect, it is a regressive form, demonstrating that the imaginary is never surpassed but simply imbricated, in various ways, with the symbolic.

For Metz, the mirror analogy is primarily useful as a way of ascertaining the position of the spectator. Of course, the spectator is already an ego, but where is that ego? Like many before him, Metz claims that the spectator is at the place of the camera; identifying with the camera’s gaze, the spectator shares its ubiquity. This is the primary cinematic identification and it is one that allows the re-entry of the imaginary, whose principal illusion is that of perceptual mastery (like phenomenology): ‘the spectator identifies with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendent subject, which comes before every there is.’25 Aligning the spectator’s position with Melanie Klein’s theories of introjection and projection reinforces Metz’s notion of the spectator as master of images, prey to an illusion of control.

While Metz isolates the absence of the spectator’s own body from the screen as a serious difference between cinema and the mirror but proceeds with the analogy, it is this presence of the reflection of one’s own body that is definitive in the Lacanian (and earlier) accounts of the phenomenon. Lacan borrows his description of the infant’s fascination with its own mirror image from Henri Wallon, who was suspicious of psychoanalysis and its theory of the unconscious. Wallon analyzed the phenomenon in relation to the child’s gradual intellectual grasp of the status of the image as image,

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23 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 45.
25 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 49 (emphasis in original).
which nevertheless allowed him the vision of his body as a whole, a sight not accessible to the child outside of this reflection. 26 Merleau-Ponty criticized Wallon’s grasp of the phenomenon as a purely intellectual exercise, stressing instead its affective and bodily dimensions. It is not a problem, as Wallon thought, of the existence of two selves in two different places (as a mirror image and a lived, though inchoate, being) and the need for their reconciliation but, for Merleau-Ponty, of a recognition of the body in the mirror as the child’s own body, as the aspect of himself that is visible to others, of the way in which his unity appears to others. It is hence a question of the relation between seeing and being seen, and the continued belief in the ‘quasi-presence’ of his body in the mirror, despite any intellectual understanding, can be attributed to the magical properties of images. 27

The distinctiveness of Lacan’s mirror lies in his emphasis upon division, dehiscence, alienation, misrecognition – the unity of the subject can only be located elsewhere – and this disjunction is never resolved. The mirror certainly witnesses the emergence of the ego but this ego is not defined in terms of ‘perceptual mastery’ but in terms of defensiveness, a form of totality that is ‘orthopaedic’ and the ‘assumption of the armour of an alienating identity’. 28 It could be argued that perceptual mastery is a form of defense (in its illusion of power), but for Lacan this defense is that of an extremely fragile identity, one posited as a unity when it is really haunted by fracture and division. If it is linked to perception, it is a self-perception (and a deceptive one at that). Nevertheless, the mirror is not only about the ego as alienating identity but, because it is an externality that seems to contain the unity, it inevitably summons up all the conundrums of the subject’s relation to space. Lacan writes, ‘I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the imago, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality – or, as they say, between the Innenwelt and the Umwelt.’ 29 Lacan refers to Roger Caillois more than once, and in the mirror-stage essay, his work is linked to the ‘signification of space for the living organism’. 30 In Caillois’s analysis of heteromorphic identification as ‘legendary psychasthenia’, morphological

29 Ibid. (emphasis in original).
30 Ibid., p. 3.
mimicry becomes an ‘obsession with space in its derealizing effect’. For Caillois, this form of mimicry involves a depersonalization, an assimilation of the subject into space, the loss of any conception of perceptual mastery.\footnote{Roger Caillois, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychaesthenia’, \textit{October}, 31 (Winter 1984), pp.16–32.} Cinema is, perhaps, the limit case of the derealization of space. But Metz – with his attachment to the problem of the impression of reality and to the ‘I know very well but even so...’ of a fetishistic structure of knowledge – does not, as might be expected, grasp as psychically central this derealizing effect. It would tend to disconcert, to dislocate the spectator – to dislodge any sense of mastery.

Metz’s analysis of the imaginary signifier develops along two axes that foreground two binary oppositions: the imaginary vs. the real (understood as non-imagistic presence) and the imaginary vs. the symbolic (where ‘symbolic’ is often collapsed onto Freudian secondary processes). These two threads of his theory are rarely, if ever, brought together, whereas for Lacan, ‘The whole problem is that of the juncture of the symbolic and of the imaginary in the constitution of the real.’\footnote{Jacques Lacan, ‘The Topic of the Imaginary,’ in \textit{The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954}, trans. by John Forrester, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1988 [1975]), 73–88, (p. 74).} Optics is a particularly privileged science for Lacan because, unlike other sciences that cut up or dissect their objects, optics ‘sets itself to produce, by means of apparatuses, that peculiar thing called \textit{images}’. A symbolic language (mathematics) subtends the crucial hypothesis of optics: ‘for each given point in real space, there must be one point and one corresponding point only in another space, which is the imaginary space’\footnote{Ibid., p. 76 (emphasis in original).}. In ‘The topic of the imaginary’ in Seminar I, Lacan resorts to another optical phenomenon as a supplement to the mirror in grasping the imaginary – the experiment of the inverted bouquet (Figure 13.1). Using a spherical (concave) mirror allows him to deploy a distinction between real images (in optics, those that are the result of the convergence of reflected light rays) and virtual images (in which the rays do not converge, as in a flat mirror)\footnote{A concave mirror such as the one in the experiment of the inverted bouquet will produce a real (and inverted) image when the object is located either at or beyond the centre of curvature or between the centre of curvature and the focal point. When the object is located at the focal point of a concave mirror, there is no image (the light rays are parallel and do not converge or diverge), and when the object is located in front of the focal point, the image will be virtual (and upright). Hence, concave mirrors sometimes produce real images and sometimes virtual ones. But in the experiment of the inverted bouquet, the bouquet is placed upside down at the centre of curvature.}. In this experiment, a vase is placed on a stand and a bouquet of flowers hangs beneath the stand in front of a concave mirror.
The subject (represented by a disembodied eye) perceives an image (a bit blurry because the rays do not quite cross at the same place) of a bouquet of flowers (real image) in a vase (imaginary image). Lacan makes sure to point out that flowers and vase could be reversed but he is clearly invested in this arrangement because the vase lends itself so easily as a representation of the body-ego, the container (‘the body gives the subject the first form which allows him to locate what pertains to the ego and what does not’), and the flowers, the contained real (reality is ‘not delimited by anything, cannot yet be the object of any definition’, is neither good nor bad but ‘chaotic’ and ‘absolute, primal’). Nevertheless, Lacan insists that the arrangement is versatile and that the positions of real and imaginary can be exchanged as long as their relations are maintained. In addition, the entire schema depends upon the eye, the subject, being in the right place:

For there to be an illusion, for there to be a world constituted, in front of the eye looking, in which the imaginary can include the real and by the same token, fashion it, in which the real also can include and, by the same


token, locate the imaginary, one condition must be fulfilled – as I have said, the eye must be in a specific position, it must be inside the cone [...] in the relation of the imaginary and the real, and in the constitution of the world such as results from it, everything depends on the position of the subject. And the position of the subject [...] is essentially characterized by its place in the symbolic world, in other words in the world of speech.36

It should not be surprising, then, that Lacan uses this schema as a way to critique Melanie Klein’s relation to language and to the imaginary. When she attempts to describe her patient’s behaviour in relation to the interplay of projections, introjections, good and bad objects, and sadism, her use of language is ‘in the domain of the imaginary’. But when she speaks, ‘something happens’. The signifier does not represent, it acts. 37

The flat mirror in the mirror phase produces a virtual image, which is to say that you see it where it is not. This displacement, this spatial derealization is aligned with the méconnaisance of the specular ‘I’, its assumption of a fictional identity, always somewhere else. But it is possible to see the real image of the flowers in the imaginary vase only if the eye, representing the ‘I’ of language, is positioned within a certain field, within a delicate choreography of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. In the experiment of the inverted bouquet, the subject is reflected in the mirror only figuratively, through Lacan’s conflation of the vase as container and the ego. The eye of the subject of language, already in the symbolic, is somewhere else, nearby. Why did Metz not make recourse to this schema, which seems closer to the cinematic experience? Where anything can be reflected in the mirror except the subject himself, a disembodied eye/I, whose positioning is, nevertheless, crucial to the operation? Where real and imaginary both become functions of images? This is the residual effect of Metz’s alliance with a semiotics that rests on binary oppositions, that excludes the category of the real only to see it surreptitiously re-enter the theoretical scene in disguise.

Spatial derealization is a crucial component of the imaginary, but no less crucial is its relation to temporality. The mirror image is ahead of the child who lags behind, caught in a relation of dependency linked to motor incoordination. This is why anticipation is so critical in Lacan’s analysis; there is always a projection into a future yet to come. The mirror phase is ‘experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of

36 Ibid., p. 80.
37 Ibid., p. 74.
the individual into history. The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic. But anticipation for Lacan is not limited to the domain of the imaginary; it also necessarily structures the field of meaning, of signification. In a movement beyond Saussure, the signifier and the signified are dissociated in Lacan, so much so that the bar between the two indicates a barrier resistant to signification, which can only be understood in relation to slippage, movement along a chain that touches down upon the signified only at moments, *points de capiton*. Hence, signification is never instantaneous (nor is recognition in the mirror phase, ultimately):

> For the signifier, by its very nature, always anticipates meaning by unfolding its dimension before it. As is seen at the level of the sentence when it is interrupted before the significant term: ‘I shall never...’, ‘All the same it is...’, ‘And yet there may be...’. Such sentences are not without meaning, a meaning all the more oppressive in that it is content to make us wait for it. [...] From which we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning ‘insists’ but that none of the chain’s elements ‘consists’ in the signification it can provide at that very moment.

This emphasis upon movement, anticipation, memory, and forgetting in processes of signification could be considered not as a perfect analogy for film but as the very description of its operation. Consider, for instance, the focus on ellipsis here – which in Lacan’s examples, suspends a train of signifiers, interrupts it – in relation to the function of ellipsis in film, as annihilating ‘real’ time (by virtue of the cut) and hence producing a specifically cinematic time that always lays out its meaning before it, never quite catching up. Metz has focused on the difference between photography and film, particularly in the essay ‘Photography and Fetish’, in relation to temporality (agreeing with Roland Barthes that photography marks a ‘that has been’ over and against film’s ‘this is happening’). And in ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, he cites Lacan’s ‘Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty’; here, Lacan analyzes a logic problem in which three prisoners, seeing only a white or black marking on the others but

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unable to see their own marks, are told that the one who discovers his own colour first will attain freedom.\textsuperscript{40} For Metz, this is a demonstration of the fact that identification is not achieved in a moment but must be continually repeated and renewed – a rationalization for the comparison of cinema to the mirror despite the fact that the spectator is an adult who has long since left the mirror phase. However, for Lacan, what is at issue here is the integral role of hesitation, interruption, temporal tension, and, above all, anticipation in the assertion of certainty (particularly about oneself, hence a connection to the mirror phase). All three prisoners come to the conclusion that they are ‘white’ based on a reading of the stages of hesitation of the other two, and the entire process is informed by a desire not to be ‘too late’.\textsuperscript{41} Anticipation and suspension/doubt are not external to the logical process but an integral aspect of its ambiguity. The pressure of time is that of being left behind.

Metz’s intuition that cinema was on the side of the imaginary generated an enormously productive amount of thinking about the position of the spectator as an aspect of the apparatus. And I would say that one of his major contributions, along with others – Jean-Louis Baudry and Jean-Pierre Oudart, for instance – was to displace psychoanalysis in film criticism from the psychoanalysis of characters (or the \textit{auteur}) to a consideration of the spectator’s engagement with film. But his retention of a phenomenological understanding of the image as analogy (and a quasi-mystical one at that) consistently subtended and deflected his deployment of psychoanalysis. Claiming that a phenomenological description of the object precedes and supports a psychoanalytic analysis negates the psychoanalytic account of the complex emergence of the object for the subject and consequently of the bankruptcy of the very distinction between subject and object. For Lacan, the image is not a likeness of, not in an analogical relation to, the real. An image is the convergence or nonconvergence of light rays in relation to the position of the subject. It is produced as a particular conjunction of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. Identification is the assumption of an image (an \textit{imago}) that never coincides with oneself, but it is also the stuttering temporality, the interplay of hesitation and haste in the assertion of certitude about


\textsuperscript{41} For Lacan, this scenario is an exemplification of the idea of a ‘collective’ (he refers to Freud’s \textit{Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego}). Certitude about one’s identity is inevitably linked to a desire not to be excluded from the category of ‘man’.
oneself. It can only take place through a certain derealization of space. But what impact would this have on a psychoanalytic delineation of cinema? For Metz, cinema’s affiliation with the imaginary, conflated with ideology, must be countered by the theorist’s embrace of a knowledge grounded in the symbolic (‘a fetishism that has taken up a position as far as possible along its cognitive flank’). The imaginary, as illusion of perceptual mastery, as uncontested love of cinema, keeps the subject in place. But if one emphasizes the imaginary’s affiliation with a derealization of space, an alienation linked to the very problem of a spatial location that is a delicate balancing act between real and virtual images, the subject’s alleged stability must be interrogated. In the mirror, the reflected rays of light do not converge in the place where the image is, leaving the ‘self’ stranded in a space that will always be disjunctive, in need of negotiation. And yet – a virtual image such as that of the plane mirror is defined by the fact that it cannot be screened (only a real image can be recorded and screened). Metz was right – the spectator will never see his mirror image on the screen, but the work of the imaginary is not exhausted by an account of the mirror phase. It too must be put into place in relation to the shifting categories of the symbolic and the real. And we must not forget that assurance, certitude about identity – all of those things that Metz links to the imaginary – are a function of the temporal momentum of anticipation and hesitation, interruption and precipitation, all of those modes of temporality incarnated by the film’s movement. Metz defines the image as analogous to the real rather than as an aspect of its production for a subject. In the end, much as he would like to, Metz fails to disengage himself from the imaginary – not in the way he acknowledges, through a continual, inevitably inescapable love of cinema, but through a love of analogy as a, if not the, primary method of theory.

About the author

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42 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 76.