IV

Narration, Enunciation, Cinephilia
15. **Cinema: Image or Narrative?**

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**Abstract**

This chapter re-evaluates Metz’s relationship with narrative studies as well as his contribution to French narratology. A rereading of his famous ‘Cinéma: langue ou langage?’ leads us to a conception of narrative that reconnects with perception and restores a direct link between narrative and image, with the cinematic narrative based on the necessity of a contact with the image. This opens the possibility of a narrative ‘aesthetics’ in which the story is no longer that which is told independently of the images but, on the contrary, that which derives from the images, even from the analysis of images. Finally, the essay exemplifies these ideas based on the concrete narrative experience of Atom Egoyan’s film *Exotica* (CAN 1994).

**Keywords:** film semiotics/film semiology, narratology, cinematic narrativity, aesthetics, film analysis, image theory

**French Narratology: With and Without Christian Metz**

If Christian Metz never *sensu stricto* developed a ‘narrative model’, narrative is often very close to what he writes about, even occasionally at the centre, notably in his first articles and in his last book (on which these reflections are primarily based). His work thus testifies to a relationship of proximity and familiarity while nonetheless remaining outside of narrative studies. Starting with his ‘Notes Toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative’ (1966),¹ his writings have played a crucial role in general narratology. While narrative studies were multiplying in literary studies, Metz posed the question of the

‘phenomenology of their subject’ and of the conditions of their validity by asking: ‘How is a narrative recognized, prior to all analysis?’ This essay, although published in the first volume of his *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (1968), does not specifically focus on cinema. In it, Metz observes that the question applies to all kinds of narratives, regardless of medium (his examples are drawn equally from novels and films). Metz develops here what he will later call ‘the structural analysis of actual narrativity – that is to say of the narrative taken independently from the vehicles carrying it (the film, the book)’. Of course, it is just one article but one that left its mark as much on Gérard Genette’s subsequent *Narrative Discourse* (Genette likewise greatly influenced filmic narratology) as on studies of storytelling in film. But Metz’s work contributed specifically to the narratology of film, which in short order came to superimpose itself on literary narratology. His article: ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ (1964), particularly the part devoted to storytelling (to which I will return at greater length), is here germane, as is his ‘Modern Cinema and Narrativity’ (1966). The latter is a reaction to a critical tendency that perceived modern European cinema as freed from narrativity: Metz demonstrates that certain screenwriters’ and filmmakers’ abandonment of classical plots – with a highly codified and predictable content of action that is pragmatic, explicit, concrete, visible, represented, and spectacular – as an essential element of storytelling in no way implies the abandonment of narrativity. According to Metz, a loose narrative – with little dramatic action, elliptical, ambiguous, disconcerting, minimalist, unpredictable, incomplete, based on transformations that partially escape representation or causal logic – still remains a narrative. If this text seems important to us today, ahead of its time, it is not only because it reflects narration in all its diversity and forms, including the least normative, but also because it implicitly points out the discrepancy between the structural narratology of the time – preoccupied with analyzing folk tales and classical narratives from the past (or the present) – and a contemporary production that situates itself in a rupture. Metz, however, proposes neither a model nor

2 Ibid., p. 17.
3 Christian Metz, ‘Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film’, in *Film Language*, 108-46 (p.144; emphasis in original). [This essay is a compilation of three of Metz’s essays from 1966-67; translator’s note].
analytical tools but an extension of his ‘Notes Toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative’ by demonstrating the need to recognize narrative plurality.

This article on the modernity of European film comes on the heels of his ‘Mirror Construction in Fellini’s 8½’, published in January of the same year, wherein Metz analyzes a modern film. In fact, it is one of his very rare studies devoted specifically to a film. Here again, his analysis captures our attention both for its specific contents and for what escapes it. His approach, although not ‘narratological’ (no mention is made of his then-current research on storytelling), is nonetheless not non-narrative. This study constitutes a first step towards a reflection on enunciation/narration that twenty-five years later would have decisive repercussions in Metz’s final work.

In the 1980s, the French scholar’s initial investigations subsequently inspired a prolonged reverberation, authored by younger colleagues. Interestingly, his followers felt the need to strenuously analyze filmic narratives, i.e. films themselves, a practice for which, as we know, Metz felt little affinity. Thus, in his writings, you will not find a film studies equivalent of works such as Narrative Discourse, S/Z, or Maupassant: The Semiotics of Text. Nevertheless, his explicit homage to analytical activity in the penultimate paragraph of L’énonciation impersonnelle (1991) leaves little doubt about its importance for him:

"I cannot close this overview on the works that have most influenced me without saying something about a type of writing superficially very different [from my own] that I frequently practiced (only as a reader, but with a keen interest and with the feeling that something important was at stake), scholarship that attacks the problem by the other end: film analyses."

7 Christian Metz, ‘Mirror Construction in Fellini’s 8½’ [1966], in Film Language, pp. 228-34.
8 Certain scholars mined different aspects of Metz’s thinking: the screenplay, the ties between cinema and literature (F. Vanoye); fiction (R. Odin); sources of ‘monstration’ and narration (A. Gaudreault); point of view and subjectivity (F. Jost); spatiality (A. Gardies); and the character (M. Vernet).
9 During the Metz colloquium, Raymond Bellour reminded us that we can count a total of three film analyses in Christian Metz’s work; see also his article in this volume.
It is as if, out of caution, Metz often placed theoretical language between himself and a film.

After the initial literary and filmic narratologies of the 1980s, narratology’s third phase, which resembles more a punctuation, is that of a Metzian enunciation that represents an acme as well as a swan song in France. *L’énonciation impersonnelle* perfectly describes its author’s intimate and distant ties with storytelling and narrative studies. The first two pages evoke narratology as that Other, foreign to his approach. When he writes in the opening that: ‘Narratology never tires of telling us that the enunciator and the addressee are abstract and structural representations, “places”, or a little later that ‘we mustn’t […] transfer on the enunciative apparatus the characteristics of its representational embodiment, like those narratologists who, after having defined the ideal Reader (Implied, Immanent, etc.) describe for us in detail his reactions in a psychological and novelistic vocabulary’, it is understood that his reflection remains on the outside.12

The fact that one of the major horizons of *L’énonciation impersonnelle* is narrative fiction does not suffice to make of it a book on narratology. The last chapter, on the other hand, is unequivocal. We read therein that enunciation and narration, usually distinct, can only merge when a discourse presents the dual nature of being narrative, and without a preliminary code, an autonomous support comparable to what is the idiom for the novel, so that its enunciation consists entirely in a narration.13

A few pages later, Metz adds that:

In certain examples and particularly in narrative films, we no longer have theoretical criteria for distinguishing between narration and enunciation. […] Narrative film is no longer the only place where enunciation becomes narration, but also where narration takes responsibility (in an underlying manner) for the totality of the enunciation. *The recovery occurs by the two ends at once.* […] Narration, on the part of the terrain it occupies, takes charge of all the discursive adjustments, all enunciation. Moreover, when we think about figures that everyone considers enunciative, we generally realize that they are also inseparably narrative: diegetic

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12 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
13 Ibid., p. 175.
speaker, non-diegetic speaker, voice-over or voice-in, direct regard of the camera, motivated or unmotivated music, off-screen, etc.

This epilogue summarizes the work and confirms, if that were necessary, that the narrative theoretician was right to feel concerned by *L’énonciation impersonnelle* with each of its explorations of studied configurations. The reader will leave the book with the precise and clear-cut hypothesis of an impersonal *narration* whose unique setting is the film itself and its configurations.

Christian Metz thus led the way for a film narratology by posing phenomenological conditions, and he announced the end by implementing a quarter turn in the direction of enunciation. Without directly taking part, he nonetheless remained an attentive viewer and indirect actor, if only through the rich and generous commentaries with which he graced his colleagues’ work.

In France, there followed a fourth period of divorce, a divorce all the more striking because semio-narratology took centre stage in the 1980s. It is worth noting that film studies alone was affected by this silence; literary narratology and narratology in general did not experience, it seems, this downward trend. Several reasons can explain the French apathy for the study of filmic narratology in the 1990s.

Thus, a dual disinterest was symmetrically accompanied by new interests. There was a growing disinterest in so-called ‘content’ analyses that, on the one hand, did not take into account the work, or even the existence, of images outside of their vehicular function, and that on the other hand addressed filmic content primarily in terms of what constitutes a norm. In sum, narrative analysis was more concerned with acknowledging an ideally universal matter (with actants, narrative diagrams, functions, trials, etc.), or, beyond content, with narrative strategies (what kind of focalization, ocularization, what kind of narration and what narrative authority, what kind of temporal organization, etc.), than with being attentive to the

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14 Ibid., pp. 183-87.
15 Guido Kirsten tells me that this is not the case in Germany.
16 Michel Marie points out that narrative analysis never really disappeared, even in France. Indeed, what faded is less narrative analysis but narrative theory, a ‘narratology’ that presents itself as such.
17 I develop this question, here raised only generally, in a subsequent paper whose publication is forthcoming: ‘Ce que l’esthétique peut pour le récit filmique’, in *Tout ce que l’esthétique permet! (à l’endroit et au-delà du cinéma)*, ed. by Térésa Faucon and Barbara Le Maître (Paris: IRCAV-CRECI [forthcoming]).
singular invention of films, independently of these models or typologies. At best, recalcitrant objects were considered in terms of their deviation from the norm.

More generally, this sudden change of regime displays a mounting disinterest in structural analysis which began, according to Genette, in 1972, just when he was advocating an open structuralism, deeming an overly structural analysis too ‘internal’.\footnote{See, in particular, Gérard Genette’s ‘Critique et poétique’, in \textit{Figures III} (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 9-12 (p. 10). However, this tendency in fact goes back to 1966 with his ‘Structuralisme et critique littéraire’, in \textit{Figures I} (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 145-70.} For those who assume that the narrative embodies the ‘literary’ part of the film, this disinterest went hand in hand with the rejection of the linguistic and literary heritage.

Simultaneously, interests shifted in two opposite directions. Some scholars turned towards sociological or context-based approaches, focused either on a film’s production or reception. That’s what the authors of cultural/gender/star/queer studies, etc. embarked on. We can call this a centrifugal displacement in relation to the filmic ‘text’, which encourages connecting the film to its exterior.\footnote{If this approach has had the tendency to dispense with the question of narrative, Pierre Beylot’s research demonstrates that it can also be articulated therein. His study, \textit{Le récit audiovisuel} (Paris: A. Colin, 2000) constitutes not only a revival of research on audiovisual narrative but also a crossroads between narrative studies and Anglophone theories. He considers audiovisual fiction films to be cultural productions taking part in the social sphere, taking into account differentiated practices. The word ‘practices’ should indicate both the manner in which a story is conceived and is developed but also the modes of its reception by a viewer who is likewise a social construct.}

Symmetrically, another displacement occurred, this one centripetal, because even though the story was weakened by the context, it shattered from within in favour of the \textit{image} considered in all its dimensions (plastic, expressive, representational, figural) – image \textit{qua} image, in its visual and (ideally) audio materiality, directly connected to the sense organs. This change of scale is accompanied by an abandonment of the linguistic and literary legacy in favour of another tradition, that of philosophy and art history.\footnote{This movement within continues outside each time film images are questioned in their dialogue with other types of images: pictorial, photographic, cave drawings, etc. Nevertheless, it is no longer the film that ‘eyes’ the outside but its images taken in their singularity.} Film aesthetics then stepped in to recover semiology and narratology.

For the past twenty years, aesthetics has invited us to a reconciliation with images, which is accompanied by a need to differentiate itself from narrative analysis. Even if we are ‘trained to accept that films tell stories’, as Jacques Aumont writes,
analyzing films is meaningful only if in the moving visual images (and in the inevitably temporal audio images) of which they are made up, something more or something else is said than simply storytelling, which comes under thinking.\(^{21}\)

It was also a question of showing that ‘an image, no longer satisfied just with what it represents’ will ‘enable a new understanding of an image that coincides neither with its narrative goal, nor with its mimetic effectiveness, nor with its expressive logic’.\(^{22}\) To accept that is ‘to listen to a visible whose visibility is never completely given, which is to be rebuilt’.\(^{23}\) We must be attentive not only to the image but also and especially to what remains unseen in the image, to the dimension no longer representational but figural of the images, which resembles more an energy or a power than a representational or narrative function. Depending on the author, this is formulated in a more or less controversial manner and realized in a mutual indifference between aesthetics and narrative studies.

**Rediscovering the Image in the Narrative**

If today it seems to us not only possible but also desirable to restore a connection between image and narrative, it is because a number of narrative and aesthetic analyses are doing it naturally, implicitly, or secretly, without saying so (sometimes without even knowing it). In reality, aesthetic and narrative analyses are preoccupied with a similar material, even if they don’t seem to construct the same object: for the first, the film is a sum of images; for the latter a entity.

This question of scale brings us back to Christian Metz, specifically to his well-known article ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’ where he questions the relationship between the narrative and the image. Writing in 1964, he had this to say about the similarities cinema has and maintains with narrativity:

> The rule of the ‘story’ is so powerful that the image, which is said to be the major constituent of film, vanishes behind the plot it has woven – if we are to believe some analyses – so that the cinema is only in theory the art of


images. Film, which by nature one would think adapted to a transversal reading, through the leisurely investigation of the visual content of each shot, becomes almost immediately the subject of a longitudinal reading, which is precipitous, ‘anxious’, and concerned only with ‘what’s next’. The sequence does not string the individual shots; it suppresses them. [...] It is as if a kind of induction current were linking images among themselves, whatever one did, as if the human mind (the spectator’s as well as the filmmaker’s) were incapable of not making a connection between two successive images.24

Thus, each filmic image summons up the next. As spectators, we are as sensitive – indeed more sensitive – to this flow, this march forward of images and the movement that carries them ahead, than to the images themselves taken individually.25 Metz here puts filmic narrative in contact with its root. He conveys a very strong intuition in the place of articulation between the image and what exceeds or overflows from it and which is called the narrative. The effect of this ‘inductive current’, which makes of the filmic image a smooth surface on which the gaze is invited to continually slide along, is still more powerfully felt when it is compromised than when it is implemented in its ordinary functioning, where it occurs unnoticed.

The denouement of John Sayles’s film Limbo (USA 1999) offers a remarkable example of something gone awry. Its screening in a Paris cinema in the 11th arrondissement triggered unusual feelings of dissatisfaction. That the audience liked or disliked the film is perfectly normal; that is not the question. A single image posed a problem to the offended audience members, or more precisely an absent image at the film’s end: three characters (a young girl, her mother, and the mother’s lover) fleeing a mortal danger become stranded on a desert island; some men arrive by helicopter either to save them or to eliminate them. Perfectly aware of the risk involved, the three decide to reveal themselves. Huddled together, they desperately watch as the helicopter heads towards them; they are filmed in a medium shot in the centre of the image. The last shot shows the sky, white and empty, while we

25 The term image is here employed in a precise manner: it is a filmic entity not to be confused either with a film still nor with a film shot. It may be a part of a shot or include several shots. Comparable to Roland Barthes’ notion of lexie that he develops in S/Z, it is a kind of reading unity, a space convenient for observing the senses; see Barthes, S/Z, in particular Chapter VII. For more on this idea, see: Anne Goliot-Lété, ‘L’image de film inventée par l’analyse’, in L’analyse de film en question. Regards, champs, lectures, ed. by Jacqueline Nacache, (Paris: L’Hamattan, 2006), pp. 15-29.
hear the whir of the propellers: so ends the film as the credits begin to roll. What is surprising here is neither the image of the three characters nor that of the sky, both rather ordinary, but that they remain without echo. The awaited response doesn’t come and the film ends very abruptly, denying its characters their right to life or death, thus depriving the audience of their fate. The credits arrive without a transition, without even the visual softening of a fade to black. What a shock for the spectator, even those who are connoisseurs of open endings (in any case, this cannot be construed as one). The unhappy audience members complained to the projectionist, some holding him almost responsible for the misdeed, which couldn’t in their minds be attributed to the filmmaker. It was impossible for them to believe in this eternally suspended ending. If they felt manipulated and exploited by the film, it is because their reading, headlong, out of step with the march forward and anxious for the what was to come (in other words, the ending) couldn’t cope with such a brutal interruption, with this kind of narrative power outage. The spectacle of Noelle, Donna, and Joe’s death would have most certainly been less terrible than that of the violent and transgressive death reserved for them by the narrative. In reaffirming the power of enunciation, this final, strongly ‘derealizing’ gesture invites a re-evaluation of the film and dismisses it to limbo, disembodifying the characters, eliminating their world, and erasing their history. One missing image all by itself can thus raze an entire edifice.

This extreme case emblematically illuminates much more ordinary examples and tells us that a filmic narrative is first and foremost a sensory experience – at least in the empirical approach of an initial viewing (which is but one practice among others), and a fortiori prior to all analysis. There is the feeling of an ‘inductive current’, of a ‘logic of implication’ that goes through images, the feeling of an unstoppable flight of visual and audio images in movement that overflow, persist, and become lost outside themselves. If, as Metz writes, ‘the sequence doesn’t string the individual images; it suppresses them’, it is not because it denies the ontological initial step but rather because it eliminates its borders and is aware of an organic circulation within the film. A succession of shots is more a movement of rolled up images wound up together than a simple accumulation. It is in the movement of this audiovisual flow that a narrative takes form, rather than in its supposedly literary dimension, in the film’s words (dialogues, text in voiceover, title cards, etc.) or in its screenplay (which itself makes up a narrative, but another narrative). Whether an expected image is not in its

place (*Limbo*), or just the opposite, an unexpected image suddenly appears (as in the narrative breaks Atom Egoyan regularly employs in his films), the flow is suddenly interrupted and we become acutely aware of its force.

To read a narrative is thus to be involved in two distinct activities: one perceptive (I perceive images in movement, which disappear as quickly as they appear and which forge and produce their story); the other cognitive (I build a story based on perceived images that immediately disappear). Perception and cognition are the two routes of access to a filmic narrative. They cannot be exactly parallel or homologous: to build progressively a story is to comply to the logic of increase, accumulation, and summarizing. It is to evoke a memory at a given moment, to synthesize all that came before, that forms an entity: a story calls on memory. In contrast, perception occurs in the moment. Eye and ear are like a cursor moving along a film. The contact that ties the image and soundtrack to the organs of seeing and hearing is reduced to a point. I can only perceive one image at a time (albeit sometimes a very complex image): the one I have before my eyes and in my ears. Thus, if we consider the empirical experience that Metz’s text refers us back to, images fade away and are absorbed by the story, but one image always remains in order to assure in the present the specific contact with eye and ear. This is why the phenomenon of the erasing or wiping of the image cannot be confused with a repudiation or a denial of the image. The narrative sensation during the viewing of a film is simultaneously born from the need to unstick the eye from the images and to delete them in favour of an inclusive and totalizing gesture of cognitive construction, all while continuously maintaining a point of contact with the image in movement to ensure perception, without which there can be no story. In other words, a story is based on the necessity of a contact with the image, while coincidentally organizing its disappearance.

Already in his early founding text, ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, which (in the short section devoted to narrative) queries how one senses narrativity, Metz formulates – before asking how one explicitly recognizes a story – his first ‘notes toward a phenomenology of the narrative’ (here, a *filmic* narrative). His notes remind us that a filmic narrative, as part of the experience of its screening, before becoming an object of intellect, addresses the senses and causes a sensation. Prior to an ‘impression of narrativity’, which François Jost evokes in reference to the impression

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of reality, it seems possible to imagine a sensation of narrativity. Metz subsequently reminds us that this sensation is born in the slide from one image to the next rather than in the images themselves, simultaneously implying that the resulting obliteration from this slide happens little by little, without stopping and astonishingly nowhere more than in the contact with an image on which it completely relies.

Tackling the narrative phenomenon by highlighting the story’s ‘deletion’ of images, as Metz does, paradoxically amounts to restoring a link between the two. As such, the Metzian proposal is diametrically opposed to the structural enterprise.

In 1981, Jacques Aumont wrote that it is ‘impossible to assign any place in filmic discourse to narrative procedures’ and that these ‘slide across the figures of editing but also freeze in framings, slips “in” the represented itself’, which doesn’t prevent him from defending a few lines later the idea that ‘filmic narration [...] has only little to do in itself with the image’ and that ‘the best studies on filmic storytelling can only address the story in the film and never really the film (the entire film) as narrative’. Ten years later, Metz responded by saying that we are ‘not finished with an explicitly factual framework that corresponds to a kind of screenplay or a skeleton rather than to the film itself’ and that ‘when a film is narrative, everything therein becomes narrative, even the grain of the film stock or the timbre of the [characters’] voices’. If Metz and Aumont’s statements largely concur that the story is everywhere in a narrative film, they nonetheless differ in how to tackle a film: where Aumont rejects a reconciliation of image and story in narrative studies, Metz perceives instead a necessary challenge, undoubtedly at the price of some difficulties in methodology and terminology.

A reconciliation between narrative and image is readable in narratology’s last phase. In his two forewords to Iris’s two special issues on ‘Cinéma et narration’, Marc Vernet observes that thinking has been displaced from overarching structures to micro-figures, which shows a new interest in the ‘visual organization of images’. This double evolution should not be underestimated: the narrative no longer (or not only) merges with the macro-structures, instead reconnecting with small units, details. At the same time, a narrative study can concentrate on an image qua image, as a filmic signifier.

More surprisingly, despite being tacit, this rapprochement can be perceived outside of narratology in Gilles Deleuze. He implies a form of

29 Metz, L’énonciation, p. 187.
30 See Iris, 7 (Cinéma et narration 1, 1986), p. 2; Iris, 8 (Cinéma et narration 2, 1988), p. 6.
crossbreeding of image and narrative. The very titles of his two-volume opus place them under the jurisdiction of the image, while nonetheless retaining a kind of hesitation or indecision as to the notion of the image. If this is usually confused with a shot, it seems to stretch out beyond the shot when the author characterizes the image-action and, more particularly, the two modalities or aspects of the image-action that are ‘large’ or ‘small’ forms. The first is an ‘organic and spiral transformation [which] has as its formula SAS (from the situation to the transformed situation via the intermediary of the action)’.31

The second ‘moves from the action to the situation, towards a new action: ASA’. This time, it is the action that discloses the situation, a fragment or an aspect of the situation, which triggers off a new action. The action advances blindly and the situation is disclosed in darkness, or in ambiguity. From action to action, the situation gradually emerges, varies, and finally either becomes clear or retains its mystery.32

Isn’t what we have here a stretching, an ‘elongation’ of the image, which carries it irresistibly onto narrative ground, with its actions, its situations, its transformations, so many entities that delight a narratologist? And when films embodying these two forms are evoked, Deleuze cannot help telling stories about them. Thus in The Movement-Image, the philosopher proposes two kinds of images: the little image (the shot) and the big image (the narrative). In The Time-Image, he will retain only the first.33 The fact that Deleuze specifically employs the same term to describe two realities that he usually sets in opposition interests us, not so much for the apparent contradiction that we might be tempted to see therein but for the intuition that these remarks tacitly make visible: that of the relationship of proximity between image and narrative, both hewn from the same matter. The second is only a kind of extension and elongation of the first. A narrative begins there, where the image, pushed to the max of its elasticity, ultimately surrenders and migrates into memory.

Perspectives: Narrative and Image in an Analysis

In ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, Christian Metz places his thought within the empirical experience of the ordinary reception of a film,

32 Deleuze, Cinema 1, p. 160.
ideally on a first viewing, during which we perceive, in the ephemerality of their movement and speed, images that produce a story. Still, it is worth emphasizing that there is not one but a multitude of narrative experiences, even of the same film. To watch a film again is not the same thing as seeing it for the first time and supposes a completely different relationship to the narrative. We rediscover a known matter, images already inscribed in our memory, but which will be perceived differently, thus allowing us to construct another story.

I would like now to pause on a film and to propose an extension of the foregoing, rather than an analysis strictly speaking. What follows is a testimony of a narrative experience where what is at stake resides less in the hypotheses themselves than in the development of the reading and in the changes that occur during repeated viewings, a reading that is made in the contact of images in the direction of the story told.

Why did I choose Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica* (CAN 1994)? Perhaps for its natural complicity with Metz’s last book, with its many markers of enunciation, and also because it is not an adaptation (and consequently its narrative contents can’t be suspected of having an earlier form, outside of the film), also for its somewhat sly narrative construction, and the problematic, intriguing nature of its story. And finally a little by chance, too.

I don’t intend to give a detailed summary of each of my viewings of the film, not even of the first, because my memory of it is too vague. Instead, I will try to understand what happened at a certain moment in my study, which, based on an interrogation of several problematic images, completely re-oriented my narrative reading of the film as a whole. What follows, then, is an account of my sudden change in interpretation.

*Exotica* presents an uneven narrative with intersecting temporalities made up of several series of images whose connections are only gradually understood. Full of holes, incomplete, and elliptical, the narrative leaves a certain number of questions unresolved. All that is not without consequences on the narrative feelings experienced when first discovering the film or on the story’s legibility taken together, a story that, far from naturally appearing like a given of the film, has to be constructed.

A first reading focused on the most ‘effective’ elements, which provide links between a series of images leading to narrative hypotheses. From this interpretation emerged a story that could be that of a man, Francis, grievously tried by the rape and murder of his little girl Lisa. He undertakes the slow, long, and painful work of mourning, until it is then hampered, blocked, and rendered impossible by the violence of the trauma. His wife is also dead, having died shortly after her daughter, in a car accident where
she was found with Harold, Francis’s brother, with whom she was possibly having an affair. (The police think so, and so does Francis, while Harold tells his daughter that Francis is imagining things; we never learn one way or another.) *Exotica* appears as a tangled web of often strange relationships, governed by contracts.

Francis has a relationship with Christina, a stripper at the Exotica (a tony club for well-to-do men where Francis hangs out several times a week). She was also, we later learn, Lisa’s babysitter. His relationship with Christina is both special and ambiguous, mixing eroticism with something like paternal love. Eric meets Christina during the search organized to find Lisa’s body (this episode occurs in a series of flashbacks) and was her lover. Eric is jealous of her relationship with Francis and puts Francis on the club’s no-entry list. In contrast, Eric doesn’t feel the same about Zoé, the club’s owner, although she has become Christina’s significant other. He is doubly tied to Zoé: he is her employee and he agreed to have a child with her, which she plans on raising without him, as per their legal agreement.

Every time he goes to the Exotica, Francis pays Tracey, his niece (and Harold’s daughter) who comes over to take care of ... the house? Lisa? and to play music. Finally, Francis, who works for the Canadian tax office, audits Thomas’s business. (Thomas sells exotic birds and fish and is rightly suspected of engaging in the illicit and highly profitable trade of rare macaw eggs.) Thomas also engages in a ritual that consists in regularly soliciting ‘exotic’ men (of very specific types) to whom he sells ballet tickets for ‘compensation’ after the performance.

Incapable of confronting his bereavement, Francis multiplies a series of rituals that allow him to remain in denial about Lisa’s death. Faced with her disappearance and demise, Francis reacts with a multiplication of his daughter’s image so that she literally becomes omnipresent, appearing in numerous photos in the living room. She serves as a pretext for the presence of Tracey, who is a kind of babysitter (although without a child to look after); a photo of Lisa as a beginner at the piano occupies the empty place on the piano stool, with Tracey pre-programming the piano to accompany the melody she plays on her flute; Lisa is reincarnated as Christina, who performs at the Exotica wearing the schoolgirl’s uniform Lisa wore in photos and on the day she died, etc.).

The film thus presents an ensemble of characters tied to each other by monetary contracts: Francis pays Christina at the Exotica; he also pays Tracey who spends her evenings at his place in his absence; Thomas sells exotic birds for a high price to his customers; he also sells ballet tickets (but later returns the money); Zoé pays Eric for his work as a DJ and as a sperm
donor; Francis gets Thomas to act on his behalf at the Exotica in exchange for a tax break, etc. Moreover, the characters’ distinguishing attributes migrate from one to another: Tracey replaces Christina in her babysitting role (Francis drives both of them home in his car); Christina replaces Lisa in her school girl role; Tracey momentarily replaces Lisa at the piano; the theme of ‘assisted’ procreation links Thomas and Zoé (she is pregnant, while he carries the macaw eggs against his belly before placing them in an incubator), etc. Certain attributes specific to their surroundings are equally interchangeable: at the airport and the Exotica, we find a two-way mirror and voyeuristic practices as well as the motif of walking through a mirror.34 Both at the club and the theatre, we find the rituals of dance, balconies, and eroticism (even if, paradoxically, the erotic charge of the scenes in the theatre is infinitely greater than those at the striptease club). Exoticism links everything together from the Exotica to Thomas’s shop.

Up until this point, the narrative rests on a network of characters and places, on a singular and systematic exchange system and on a production of repetition, all of which ensures a kind of balance.

Subsequently, the film narrates the undoing of this equilibrium, the manner in which two characters put an end to the ritualistic evenings at the club (Tracey no longer wants to spend her evenings at Francis’s house; Eric, at the Exotica, pushes Francis to break the rules, which leads to his definitive exclusion from the club). It is this severing of an obsessive ritual that leaves an opening for the beginning of the work of mourning.

My reading might have stopped there. But just at the moment when this general coherence and diegetic-narrative homogeneity appeared, some questions arose, first around three disturbing images – repetitive, non-sequential,35 and artifactual:36 they are the amateur video images that arrive without warning in the film. Secondly, around the final sequence, introduced by a third instance of these video images and leading to a second past, in a ‘past perfect’, as if, in short, the prologue was found displaced
to the film’s end. These slightly ‘disturbing’ images intend to reopen the film’s ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity. The question then is: What do these images that match poorly with my initial reading want to tell me?

Detail: A video image shows young Lisa and (probably) her mother, laughing, sitting at the piano. Then we see a hand that, pushing the camera away (signifying to the filmer to stop shooting), invades the space of the image (Figures 15.1 and 15.2). The image accelerates or is paused on an image but never advances at normal speed. Even if the three occurrences refer to the same scene and enter into a process of repetition, producing a haunting effect, for Francis as well as for the film itself, we are not dealing with the same image. Their duration is not identical (they are respectively six, ten, and eighteen seconds in length) and include a different number of freeze-frame images (four, five, then seven). It is less the ‘paternity’ of these shots, naturally attributed to Francis, than their narrative status that poses a problem here. If these images have something to do with a memory, the transitions, diegetically out-of-focus, suggest that what’s at stake is not simply an expression of a memory.

First observation: This shot, seen on two other occasions, is obviously not an explanatory flashback. It poses more questions than it answers. Moreover, the fact that it is an image recorded with a video camera indicates its status as a concrete image within the diegesis, particularly since this image has been manipulated. That it goes from a fast-forward movement to a freeze-frame on successive images points out that it is diegetically viewed (even if we are not shown Francis at home, with the remote control in hand).37 If this is a memory, we should first begin by specifying that it is a memory of an image doubled by the memory of its recording. In addition, if we consider the three instances together, we have the feeling of a return of the present of their reception (the temporality of their impact, their resonance, and their harmonics) towards the past of their production, their origin. Together, they thus form a little series that takes time backwards and which makes of the end of the film the beginning of the story. In other words, the link between the present and this past, the past before the tragedy, is accomplished via images that have the status of images within the film.38

37 These shots call to mind the fleeting video images seen just once by a character in Egoyan’s previous film, Calendar (Canada, Germany, Armenia 1993).
38 It is worth noting that the other series of images from the past – relating to the search through fields – functions completely differently. They exhibit a continuity rather than a repetition from one episode to the next. Even if certain transitions can be problematic, these flashbacks have an explanatory function, providing background information on Christina and Eric’s relationship. And they describe an episode that has a precise beginning (their meeting) and a precise end (the discovery of the girl’s corpse).
Cinema: Image or Narrative?

Figs 15.1-15.4: Exotica (Atom Egoyan, CAN 1994)
Second observation, then a hypothesis: Let us now think about these images in relation to their environment. The first occurrence takes place while Tracey carefully looks at the photos of Lisa and her mother on the side table and hanging on the living room wall (Figures 15.3 and 15.4). It is useful to add, perhaps, that Tracey contemplates the photos right after having played a melody on her flute, accompanied by the piano without pianist; the image emphasizes the empty stool, where Lisa would have sat. Together the photos and the empty stool point to a very strong presence-absence. And it is at this precise moment that the little girl and her mother appear at the piano in a black-and-white image (tinted-blue since it comes from an amateur video), which is a kind of intermediary between a moving image and a still image (due to the freeze-frame). This image that advances jerkily appears like an imperfect attempt at animation or, even better: a re-animation of the two characters in the photos. This passage establishes a link between these images and Tracey. She will later decide to end the babysitting masquerade, telling her father that Francis pretends that she is taking care of Lisa, that he wants to believe that Lisa is still there, and that her presence helps to convince him of it. This series of images (Tracey in front of the photos, then the video image of Lisa and her mother) concretely embodies a denial of death: by her very presence in the house, Tracey brings back to life the dead girl whom she pretends to babysit for (and she becomes aware of this while looking at the framed portraits). The video image, in animating the still images and in showing Lisa at the piano (where her seat remains empty), produces a real resurrection. This transition, at first felt as problematic, suddenly takes on a new aspect. The rupture becomes suture and the narrative feeling is restored where initially it seemed lacking.

The next occurrence is framed by two scenes showing Francis at the Exotica Club, two scenes separated by a short temporal ellipse. The first happens in the restroom: Francis is in a bathroom stall with the door closed while Eric speaks to him and encourages him to break the rules and to touch Christina. The image of Eric giving advice and developing his argument is framed and composed in such a way that his hand – very expressive – is reflected in a mirror. His hand is both cut off from his body and highlighted (Figure 15.5). In the scene following the ellipse, Francis places his hand on Christina's belly while she is dancing for him (Figure 15.6). Here we notice that the video image resonates quite differently: first of all, it lingers much less on the faces (Lisa's is barely visible) focusing instead on the protective hand obstructing the image (Figure 15.7). In addition, the soundtrack of the bathroom scene overlaps momentarily with the video image from the
past. We hear: ‘What will happen if I touch her?’ The question may relate to Christina or to Lisa. Read at face value, this collection of images, heterogeneous in type and temporality, represents first, a transgressive desire via touching (accentuated by the presence of the hand); secondly, the image of a little girl and a hand that intervenes to protect her; and thirdly, the image of a man touching a young woman when this is forbidden. The young woman in question is dressed in Lisa’s school uniform. The protective gesture of the maternal hand arrives thus as a symbolic response to the threat posed by the father’s hand. This interpretation, created by the editing, will not be contradicted by the third occurrence of the video image: Thomas, at the Exotica, at Francis’s bidding, reiterates the forbidden, placing his hand on Christina’s thigh. She takes Thomas’s hand and gently gives it back to him (Figures 15.8 and 15.9). This is when the third video image appears. Here again, the apparent rupture of temporalities and textures of images is captured at another level by a form of continuity (Thomas’ transgressive hand is gently prevented by Christina’s hand, then the mother’s protective hand; Figure 15.10). But this time, there won’t be a return to the present. This shot marks the transition between the assumed present and the final scene from the past before the tragedy.
Figs 15.7-15.10: Exotica (Atom Egoyan, CAN 1994)
A younger Francis with a video camera in hand films the mother and daughter at the piano (Figure 15.11); the scene is interrupted by the door bell ringing: Christina, an unhappy, pimply-faced teenager, has come to babysit Lisa. In the final scene, Francis drives Christina home. He questions her on her malaise and makes her feel good about herself by affirming her sense of responsibility. Then, finally, after having emphasized his availability and his desire to listen to her and to help her, he pays her. The scene is troubling because of its latent and diffuse eroticism (Christina’s sighs echo the lascivious sighs at the Exotica; the nature, the length, and the insistence of the exchanged looks; the role of money; the tone of the conversation, etc.) and because of all its elements that we have already seen earlier in the film and that we know will reoccur in the diegetic future. (This scene obviously evokes the scenes where Francis takes Tracey home, particularly the scene in which, before paying her, he encourages her to confide in him if she feels the need). This series of images (artifactual video images and the final sequence) makes clear – but only tangentially – a dimension of Francis’s character absent from the rest of the film. It is no longer just the image of a father in mourning that we see but also that of a concerned or personally involved man, as shown through this gesture of a masculine, adult hand placed on a youthful, feminine body, the very gesture that deprived him of his daughter. It is not at all a question of making Francis his daughter’s rapist and murderer (which the police had for a time considered) or of making his relationship with Christina into an example of pedophilia but only of acknowledging the ambiguity of the character’s complexity. Ultimately, the viewer is left with an uncertainty and the mystery remains complete.

We could also arrive at this conclusion by way of a non-narrative reading. This, for example, is what Jacques Rancière proposes in his *Film Fables*. In analyzing a passage from Fritz Lang’s *M* (GER 1931), he
opposes the ‘narrative’s Aristotelian demands’ to the ‘aesthetic demand of suspended shots’; ‘the aesthetic intrigue’ to ‘the old narrative intrigue’ or, better still, ‘the logic of the story’ to ‘that of the image’. We may well wonder about the validity of this distinction. How can Fritz Lang’s M be, following one logic, a child murderer and, following another, a good guy who makes a little girl happy? How is it that Egoyan’s Francis seems, based on the story’s Aristotelian requirements, a father deep in sorrow and also a man whose relationships with young women are deeply ambiguous as per a more aesthetic reading of the images? Putting an image back into the centre of narrative questions and admitting that the story is told via images, that it is reflected, partially dissolved there, and is endlessly reconstituted, allows us to give back to these two characters – major constituents in their respective narratives – their share of haziness and ambiguity, or to others their share of contradiction or incoherence, thus liberating the story from the corset of ‘logical sharpness’. It is also to re-evaluate narrative contents and displace them: they are no longer an objective piece of information that submits to an analysis but rather this ‘distant signified’, always slightly fantastical, towards which an analysis stretches and which, as such, is ever capable of transformation, renewal, and variation.

Translated from French by Sally Shafto

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