Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

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16. **Semiotics, Science, and Cinephilia**

Christian Metz's Last Book, *L'énonciation impersonnelle*

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**Abstract**

This chapter looks at Metz's last book, *L'énonciation impersonnelle, ou le site du film*, with an emphasis on the function of the extensive and often appreciative citation of individual films within the book. For all its broad, theoretical concern with capturing the ways in which various figures of film come to talk of the nature of film as an intentional, communicative act, *L'énonciation* is also a cinephile venture that luxuriates in the concrete aspects of specific works of cinema and which ranges over vast areas of film over vast periods of time. The book offers not only scientific analysis but also love for the art of cinema, confirming Metz's own affective investments in this most modern of popular cultural forms.

**Keywords:** film semiotics/film semiology, enunciation theory, cinephilia, cinematic figurations, film criticism

What I want to address in particular in this essay is a certain surprise as well as delight but also a perplexity – maybe a delighted perplexity then – that I felt the first time I read Metz's last book, *L'énonciation impersonnelle*, and which returns each time I come back to the book.¹ (I know I am not alone in this: most readers of the volume with whom I have conversed have admitted to a similar reaction, and Roger Odin's review of Metz's book, which I will come back to in a moment, offers 'official' recognition of this typical response.²) I am not sure that those of us who were his students could have

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guessed what this volume would look like based on the way he presented some of its arguments in his famed seminar. Of course, that seminar and the publication of part of the eventual book’s more theoretical section in the journal *Vertigo* might have given us some first indications, but it would seem that the final published volume easily provoked (and will continue to provoke\(^3\)) a sense of curiousness, a wonder at the essayistic openness of the book as a whole, and at the sometimes chatty or conversational or colloquial quality it bears. To the extent that, as Metz himself explained in his famous interview with Marc Vernet and Daniel Percheron in the journal *Ça cinéma*, behind any intellectual venture there lie psychical investments, figures, and figurations of desire and so on,\(^4\) I myself have always thought that the intrigue *L’énonciation impersonnelle* holds for me (and evidently for others) was that aspect of Metz’s corpus that I most wanted to return to and come to grips with. That is why I am presenting these exploratory thoughts as my contribution to this volume in memory of, and in honour of, Christian Metz.

In the aforementioned contemporaneous review of *L’énonciation impersonnelle*, Roger Odin sets out to invoke some sense of the surprises of the book – for example, the many moments in which the study offers direct, often expansive, expressions of Metz’s personal tastes in film (for example, there are recurrent virulent jabs at the new music-video style of 1980s moving-image culture). Complementing Odin’s evocations and extending them, I want to address another striking element of *L’énonciation*: the sheer rush of references to specific films from across wide ranges of film history. It has been easy to imagine that cine-semiotics and its brand(s) of textual analysis traded breadth of film knowledge for an insistent and incessant concentration on a very few films (for instance, Raymond Bellour on *North by Northwest* [Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1959] or Stephen Heath on *Touch of Evil* [Orson Welles, USA 1958] or Metz himself on *Adieu Philippine* [Jacques Rozier, F/I 1962] or *8½* [Federico Fellini, I/F 1963]). But whatever the accuracy of that original assessment of film semiology’s attitude toward broad knowledge (and I think this critique was often in fact misplaced, if not downright mistaken), Metz’s last volume offers a capacious and quite capricious romp across vast reaches of film history. After a downright minimal

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\(^3\) An English translation of Metz’s book by Cormac Deane was recently published by Columbia University Press, and one hopes this might encourage warranted attention for this last book by our most famous cine-semiologue.

mention of specific films in its first theoretical section (for example, Metz momentarily references *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, USA 1939), and here the citation comes only because of Francesco Casetti’s citation of it and the need Metz felt to address Casetti’s own studies of enunciation in cinema), *L’énonciation* gives itself over to a vast and admittedly eclectic cinephilia. Examples pour out from the book in exorbitant fashion and dazzle the reader with the author’s erudition. Odin captures this:

Never has a book by Christian Metz accorded so much place to examples: the ensemble is striking, both by the extreme precision of the analyses undertaken (something that won’t surprise adepts of Metz) and by the diversity of audio-visual productions that are invoked (something that in contrast is newer): fiction films from a range of countries, from all epochs (from early cinema to the present) and from all genres (melodrama, Westerns, films noirs, musical comedies, burlesques, etc.), great classics or rare films, auteur cinema, investigative cinema, popular film, experimental film, militant films, documentaries, journalistic reports, and even television shows.⁵

And, again, as Odin has noted, these prolific citations often arrive accompanied by appreciative adjectives (twice, for instance, we’re told that this or that cited film by Solanas is ‘remarquable’) or serving as the occasion for even longer aesthetic estimations. For example, there is an extended footnote on Robert Zemeckis’ *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (USA 1988) within the historical moment of Lucas-Spielberg type cinema that is quite praise-filled:

One would be wrong to despise *Roger Rabbit*, the *Star Wars* films, or other works of the same sort [genre]. It is true that an entire swath, a considerable one, of American [film] production tends to become indistinguishable from a cinema for children. There is at times in these films a loud and exploitative vulgarity, a deep stupidity, a worrisome attraction to violence. But (beyond the fact that there is, even today, an other American cinema) these works give witness to an astonishing vitality of visual invention and technical ingenuousness, a vivacity of spirit for concrete objects that is, as Europeans often forget, a real form of intelligence. Failures from French film are often bereft of these qualities.⁶

Not that reference to specific films is absent from earlier works by Metz: to take just one example, *Language and Cinema* mentions, among others, *Ordet* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, DEN 1955), *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, USA 1916), the genre works of Sergio Leone, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (F.W. Murnau, USA 1928), etc. We might well suggest that cinema as an idea and its many realizations in specific filmic works were quite often a sort of magnet for Metz’s semiological inquiries, even in cases where cinema might not have inevitably been the logical or necessary point of reference. That is, Metz was drawn to film – and to films – in a way that was more than just convenient: he didn’t just use cinema as a good test for certain general linguistic or semiological principles, a test that might even extend those principles in salutary directions. There was also an interest on his part, a psychical investment, in films. Take, for instance, one collection of Metz’s writings, *Essais sémiotiques*, which confesses on its first page that ‘unlike my other books, this one, as its title already announces, doesn’t centre on cinema, or at least not specifically and not always’.7 His stated justification for this downplaying of cinema: ‘In the order of [scholarly] work, advances often operate on several fronts at the same time.’8 Yet as early as the second page of the first essay (on whether linguistics is or is not a branch of semiology), cinema makes an appearance as if a Freudian return-of-the-repressed were at work and Metz simply couldn’t keep away from invoking the art form that had mattered so much to him in other writings; thus, to refer to the frequent accompaniment of visual culture by verbal support, Metz offers comments on diegetic versus non-diegetic voice in film and then in a footnote describes how the distinctions become blurred by a modernist cinema that has ‘started to explore [cinematic voices] in their diversity’.9 That is to say, cinematic modernism stands here as the mark of that which upends fixed divisions and therefore serves as a useful heuristic device for the testing of categories and categoricals. And even more than device, cinema manifests itself as a set of known, remembered titles whose empirical qualities can rebound on, and against, fixed theoretical principles and open them up in new directions.

There is, doubtless, the risk that, when used for such a heuristic purpose, the reference to cinema overall and to individual films turns them into

8 Ibid., p. 8.
little more than cases or exemplars or vehicles of larger processes. In other words, there is the risk that films are used to make much bigger points rather than being studied in and of themselves. Thus, to take just one example, if, as noted, it mentioned specific examples from the history of cinema, *Language and Cinema* also argued that while individual films, as finished works consigned to the fixity of celluloid, came to the spectator as so many messages, the concrete workings of the films in their specificity would have to be transcended for the specific needs of semiological analysis, which had to go beyond the empirical reality of the films themselves to accede either to the textual systems that gave them their signifying potential or to the individual codes, abstract in their own fashion, that individual empirical films instantiated at this or that moment of their material unfolding. That is, this earlier book by Metz uses individual films as cases in the construction of a broader, more abstract, theory. As Metz puts it in *Language and Cinema*: ‘For the semiotician, the message is a point of departure, the code a point of arrival.’ The individual film can seem to matter not much at all: as Metz says soon after, ‘it would still be possible to directly speak of the codes without involving any of their particular manifestations’.

On the one hand, then, cinema exists to transcend itself in the articulation of theoretical questions. On the other hand, there is also clearly, simply, directly an interest in cinema per se – an interest in individual films in all their aesthetic specificity. If, in the earlier texts, the individual film is only the materialized, manifested, or manifest message to be gone past to arrive at analytical abstraction, *L’énonciation impersonnelle* frequently seems to linger at the surface of the films themselves, which are often, as Odin also noted, luxuriated over in lovingly poetic language. Significantly, where *Language and Cinema* sees the individual filmic text as ‘a point of departure’, *L’énonciation* strongly offers a converse journey metaphor: as the theoretical first section ends, Metz announces that he will now shift to a new terrain – or what he pointedly refers to as a ‘shifting geography […] a collective and regulated [reglée] patrimony’. The imagery here is spatial but it is a spatiality embodied in a continuous journey, an ongoing process that moves onward to the films themselves rather than a departure from the empirical reality of actual films into the generalities of theory. The expansive set of individual film texts is now what one arrives at, rather

12 Ibid., p. 36.
than the abstraction that results from leaving them behind: ‘The itinerary I have chosen will make me visit (in whirlwind fashion) a hundred or so enunciative sites.’ And the itinerary itself will be termed a ‘guided tour’ to ‘some landscapes of enunciation’ (this phrase serves as title of the long, central part of the volume, which itself ends with a declaration by Metz that what he had set out to do across so many pages of citation of individual film was to follow ‘traces’ of enunciation in ‘the geography of the text’).

In many cases in the long itinerary over the figures of enunciation that Metz offers as part two of his book, the citations of the films – or of sequences or moments from them, a qualification I’ll return to – are detailed, evocative, poetic, or even lyrical. Take, for instance, Metz’s first discussion of a character’s look at the camera in Luis Buñuel’s Nazarin (MEX 1959):

In Nazarin, the Buñuelian character of the dwarf, laughable and tortured, very Spanish in a way, often directs his looks toward the spectator, as if to be pitied or even just noticed. When the woman he’s absurdly smitten with is taken off to jail, he remains fixed in the middle of the village square (and the middle of the movie screen), crying without hiding himself from view, always turned toward us, uglier than usual.

Once this evocative description winds down, Metz then starts to move from it to a broader point – first of all, that this moment of address is not just the dwarf’s but the film’s: ‘The image is a bit insistent: it wants us to pay witness to his misery.’ Here, we encounter an argument typical in L’énonciation: what is initially a willful activity by a character within the diegetic universe reveals itself to be an intentional activity of the film overall – it is now the film itself that is insisting on this action we see. For Metz – and here I’m at risk of reducing his complex argument, demonstrated at length across so many examples – enunciation is always present in film insofar as any film exists as an intentional object whose very existence embodies that intentionality. But it is only in some cases that this intentionality of the film makes its intentional nature manifest as such, rather than hiding behind the identification-garnering mechanisms of character and narrative fiction. Typically, character helps bolster the construction of diegetic universes, but Metz shows that there are numerous cases where this or that

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 172 (my emphasis).
15 Ibid., p. 43.
16 Ibid.
character in this or that film can suddenly seem to have an enunciative or narrative role rather than the character functioning within what is narrated or enunciated. That is, such characters help make the story happen as a fictional act rather than just being one more personality that the story is told about. In the case of Nazarin, the dwarf is within the story world of the film but not as a main figure: he is just someone on the margins of the story and this allows him to detach from the fiction and comment on the fact of its narration. From his relatively minor position within the narrative, he begins to move outward from the fiction to its filmic enunciation: it is the film that focuses frontally on him, that has him cry, that renders him more pathetic than before, and this can render the film’s operations tangible, expressive, manifest.

In Metz’s next move, this general comment on cinema itself as an activity of speaking to us intentionally, built up here from the singular example of Nazarin, is given a more theoretical rendition, complete with scholarly attribution:

The address, here [in Nazarin], is less explicit [franche] than in the Renoir film [Grand Illusion, F 1937, cited on the previous page] and [in the case of the Buñuel film], one might fully connect back to the diegesis what one is seeing and hearing [in other words, there is still justification within the fictional universe of the film for this dwarf to cry in so ostentatious a fashion]: there are thus diverse degrees of “illocutionary force” in address and in other enunciative figures, just as the pragmatists noted well with regards to marks of subjectivity in language, comprising the inescapable deictic as well as the simple affective epithet where there yet transpires an “enunciating” presence (see Catherine Kerbrat’s remarkable synthesis [footnote]).

In other words, we have here a set of argumentative moves: from an evoked scene in a film to the assertion that, in this particular scene, we see the standard fictional effacement of marks of enunciation undone by markers that make enunciation visible, to the conclusion, complete with theoretical jargon and bibliographic reference, that there is thus a variability generally to the process of filmic enunciation. But this conclusion then requires the adducing of more examples drawn empirically from other films, since it is these that will confirm that variability is at work across film’s capacious history.

17 Ibid.
Thus, Metz declares just after the scholarly mention of Kebrat-Orecchioni, ‘pour en revenir au cinéma’.18 That is, ‘let’s return to cinema’: in other words, let’s go back from (to stay with these just-cited pages) general concepts such as the illocutionary, the enunciative, subjectivity in language, deictics, and so on; back to this or that individual film that, each in its own way, offers up examples of an enunciation that comments on itself or reflects upon itself. Cinema – or, rather, its multitude of empirical examples – is what keeps getting discovered and returned to at the end of each trajectory. (I am referring to the chapters that make up the long middle part of Metz’s book.) At moments, L’énonciation appears to resemble not so much a guided tour, as Metz put it, (with the connotation of a set itinerary) as a quite random stroll, a stream of consciousness even, where one follows one’s follies, one’s folies and cinephilic coups de foudre, wherever they might lead. In this errancy, films and filmic moments serve as momentary anchoring points to be delectated in and then passed beyond to reach the next example: for instance, a discussion of subjective voice gives way at one point to a commentary on film musicals as per-se self-reflexive (since they perform acts of performance), which then leads into an appreciative paragraph on Three Seats for the 26th (F 1988) by Jacques Demy (or, as Metz the cinephile puts it, the ‘regretté Jacques Demy’ – again, a language of cinephilic appreciation).19 This is discussed in terms of its fictionalizing of Yves Montand’s life and its factualizing of its fiction by the presence of Montand. This wandering discussion, not fully about subjective voice, it must be admitted, is then somewhat re-anchored by a veritably explicit admission by Metz that he has gotten off topic and needs to re-anchor the discussion: ‘But I was dealing with juxtadiegetic music […] And here’s another form of it.’ (and so he launches into a discussion, replete with examples, of films where we see the rehearsal of a musical number, since these then reflect on their own musical nature).20

Where, as we’ve seen, Language and Cinema proposed the text as a point of departure, a pathway to codes and textual systems, a manifest message that needs to be analyzed to go beyond its material embodiment, L’énonciation often insists on the irreducible particularity of individual film texts. As Metz declares a few pages after his Nazarín analysis: ‘The construction of every film, or at least certain of them, can inflect the structural probabilities that abstraction offers up.’21 Certainly, there are

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 146-47.
20 Ibid., p. 147.
21 Ibid.
general principles to the notion of enunciation – for instance, it relies on the assumption that texts are intentional acts whose intentionality can become manifest in privileged moments (as he puts it late in the book’s second part, such moments ‘materialize this intentionality proper to the text itself’). These, however, can best be studied, and appreciated, and admired through the individual moments in films that embody them. Individual films put general theory to the test (rather than the other way around): as other attendees at Metz’s seminar on enunciation might confirm, one thing that, in my recollection, took place insistently was the proposing of this or that general assertion about cinematic enunciation, sometimes by students, sometimes by Metz himself, and then a search, sometimes by students, sometimes by Metz himself, for concrete filmic examples that could either confirm or contravene the general assertion and thereby force the theory to extend and develop. Likewise, in *L’énonciation impersonnelle*, the interplay of abstraction and concrete case can become quite fanciful. Let us return, for instance, to the final moments of Metz’s discussion of *Nazarin*. Here, the contravening of a general theoretical point – in this case, that there would be no constructions that are automatically or manifestly enunciative – is tied to the challenges that individual films and their modes of enactment offer to generalized theory:

One sometimes hears it asked whether this or that construction, in itself ‘is’ or isn’t a mark of enunciation. We must have the courage to discourage at the outset this mode of questioning. Even in language, there are few terms that are enunciative by nature. What in a film (just as in a novel) is capable of more or less ‘marking’ the enunciation is much more the singular and global construction of a shot or a sequence, a construction that may mobilize conventional procedures but each time modifies their value.

This general point about how filmic singularity puts theoretical generality to the test is then itself given specificity by reference to *Nazarin*, a quite fanciful reference: ‘In the scene from Bunuel, the grimacing ugliness of the dwarf matters as much as the rest, but no one would dream of listing a character’s deformity as one of the habitual or functional marks of enunciation.’ In other words, in *Nazarin*, as Metz sees it, the ugliness of

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22 Ibid., p. 166.
23 Ibid., p. 44.
24 Ibid.
the dwarf peels away from the diegesis to become part of the film’s very mechanisms of enunciation but it (the ugliness) does so in a way specific to this film and not as a generalizable process for all films (thus, ugliness elsewhere wouldn’t so easily move from the fictional space to the film’s conditions of enunciation; there is no general enunciative figure of ugliness that we could then catalogue and find dependably in other films).

Certainly, as noted, the point about Nazarin’s ugly dwarf as an enunciation and not just a character in the fiction is made fancifully – and in this respect, it’s in keeping with the frequent presence in L’énonciation impersonnelle of witty asides, whimsical and even invented figurations (this again echoes the seminar where one tried to imagine filmic procedures, however fanciful, that would contravene generality and abstract assertions). But it’s also serious in its own way: it intends to reiterate how enunciation is not a structured code within cinema but a process that runs through and throughout cinema and is in many ways beyond structure, beyond code and codification. If Metz fancifully admits that dwarfish ugliness might not belong easily to an official taxonomy of enunciative marks, he still wants it to figure somewhere (if only in the film itself and his own citation of it); not for nothing does the previous page opt for inclusion rather than exclusion of the aberrant, unique enunciative figure within enunciation’s taxonomy. Maybe no one would want to make dwarfish ugliness a received, recurrent category of enunciative marking, but Metz suggests on that previous page that the dwarf’s tears could well serve, at least in this one case, as an enunciative act. The dwarf doesn’t verbalize his misery, doesn’t offer it up in words; he simply and heartrendingly cries, and his tears speak no less than words: as Metz puts it: ‘The tears replace words: another variant.’25 In other words, as Metz shows in this chapter, part of whose title deals with ‘voices of address to the image’, there are cases in cinema where a character’s words detach from the fiction to comment on the film itself, but it can also be the case that something other than words – an excessive amount of tears in the example of Nazarin – can also serve the commentative function. Indeed, the mention of ‘variant’ might well invoke for the reader the classificatory system of the paradigm (one sobs or speaks, and each signifies in its own way its difference from its converse). In other words, Metz’s own language allows us to see individual filmic moments as both unique and unclassifiable (no other film might use tears and ugliness as enunciation) and as unique and perhaps classifiable (the ugliness and the tears are a formal variant in relation to words). This emphasis on the singular case, as I’ve

25 Ibid., p. 43.
implied throughout this essay, certainly pushes *L’énonciation impersonnelle* towards a sort of empiricism: there are as many films to be cited as there are films that are interesting to cite. In Metz’s words, ‘The variants [of enunciation] are multiple and each inventive work comes to enlarge their number.’ Every film, in its own fashion, can offer useful instruction on the act of enunciation. As Metz puts it, ‘The marks of filmic enunciation are as varied as is invariable their common foundation in a principle of textual doubling [*repli* – the idea that when marked, enunciation folds back onto a film’s fiction and says something explicit – and unfictional – about its fictionality].’

It is important to be clear about the fact that if Metz cites films for their irreducible particularity – or the irreducible particularity of this or that figuration within them (for instance, dwarfish ugliness functioning as an enunciative marking) – this is in no way intended to suggest that he then sees the singularity of each film as either somehow an organic totality (of the sort so beloved in romantic notions of the artistic text) or somehow an ineffable mystery to be invoked and appreciated and no more or less than that. We remember that the very notion of textual system in *Language and Cinema* is all about irreducible unity, but not as organic totality and not as indivisible mystery: the filmic text is an effect of interweaving codes, both specific and not, and textual analysis pursues those weaves through their many macro- and micro-imbrications. In a sense, the aesthetic text, as textual form precisely, is all about art’s potential to work with and on codification, to extend and distend signification beyond structural fixity. As Metz put it in his 1965 essay on semiology versus linguistics in *Essais sémiotiques*, ‘an idea of strict organization [...] doesn’t fit the situation of cinema, [which offers] a supple sémié, poorly formed and always nascent, an indecisive semiology emerging always-in-new-fashion out of iconological analogy’.

In other words, the function of experiment in cinema (an experimentation which can take place in the mainstream as much as in modernist alternatives) is to go beyond codifications and extend cinematic language’s resources. The idea of cinema as ‘always nascent’ is particularly noteworthy here since it clarifies both Metz’s interest (quite explicit in *L’énonciation impersonnelle*) in works of an avant-garde (for example, Michael Snow or Ernie Gehr, two cases he cites) that venture out into new territory, and his frequent reference to moments of emergence

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26 Ibid., p. 98.
27 Ibid., p. 65.
(for example, the discoveries of early cinema) as sites in which a language has not yet been reified into univocalities of meaning. The sheer range of examples demonstrates the rich variety of ways in which film (and films) can signify. In a sense, and in a way that might seem curious at first glance (but only at first glance), Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* was already one culmination of this aesthetic valorization: here, the idea of a language venturing out at its moment of birth and before it sedimented into semantic fixity became so strong that it was now standard, utilitarian language that showed itself to be a momentary reification of essential figurations, primary processes, productivity over product, and so on: poetic language ceases to be secondary – a mere add-on of rhetorical flourish to language's ostensibly fundamental communicative vocation – and becomes its fundamental form.

I've spoken of the singularity of films cited in *L'énonciation impersonnelle*, but I need to nuance that a bit. It is often not entire films that Metz cites but fragments, moments, instances. True, there are occasions where the whole of a film's plot is summed up – hence, his aforementioned discussion of Jacques Demy's *Three Seats for the 26th* is all about how its story overall tells a tale of reflexivity, and here we might remember how one of his rare discussions of a film from start to finish is of Fellini's *8½*, seen as a veritable allegory of cinematic reflection on cinema-making. (Of course, none of these analyses – to which we of course need to add Metz's well-known syntagmatic reading of Rozier's *Adieu Philippine* – is really a full analysis: they either emphasize one code – the syntagmatic, for instance – or even, as I would argue in the case of Metz's discussion of *8½*, opt for a thematic reading little different in form from typical invocations of European art cinema at the time and not really focusing on all aspects of cinema's specific signifying resources.)

Instead of the entire film, then, Metz hones in on the fragment or the figure or figuration across the unfolding of a film or what he comes to emphasize as the figural: to quote Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier* speaking of the montage of workers and sheep in *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, USA 1936),

[T]his figure is almost impossible to define properly in rhetorical terms, once again because there are no words [and we might argue that one of the stakes of this book is to argue that even in verbal language, words are no more than momentary intersections of energetic forces of condensation and displacement, metaphor and metonymy]. The binary conception of the figural, on the other hand . . . enables us to situate the opening of
Modern Times in terms of an analysis of referents whose subdivisions are less intricate, but also more real.  

Through the figural, fragments open up to vaster fields of signification that go beyond linguistic fixity: there are, for instance, the classes into which individual cases can be fitted (thus, a discussion in Essais sémiotiques of generative linguistics and the audio-visual is at one point concerned with the role of partial models and how ‘each one concerns a class of films [...] a field of acceptability’ within which individual works find their way\(^{29}\)). There are also the ways in which representations can change across the course of a single film or from one film to the next so that, for instance, an object may have one figuration in one sequence and gain different figuration later in the film. One key example would be the harp image in October (Grigoriy Aleksandrov & Sergei M. Eisenstein, SU 1928), analyzed by Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier and then re-cited by Metz in his analysis of mobile figuration in The Imaginary Signifier: in one iteration, the harp is more fully diegeticized and in another moment, less so. As Metz says, following Ropars,

> When we speak of a ‘figure’ in film, any figure, what are we talking about in the first instance? We are talking about the bringing together of two motifs [...] There are of course figures which are more complex and more diffuse, like the figure of the harps [...] but these are still fragments. The difference is that there are several of them, and also that any one of them does not necessarily involve all the filmic material which appears with it. [...] Any figure which is relatively easy to isolate in the flow of a film, and recurs with relative frequency in several films (that is to say, which has been coded in a genre and in a period) can be thought of as the temporarily solidified result of more extensive semantic trajectories which preceded it and brought it into being, and which will disperse it and create others.\(^{31}\)

And yet, I do think that there is a way in which the use of the fragment in L’énonciation impersonnelle differs from Metz’s earlier practices of citation of individual films. It would appear that one word which shows up rarely,


\(^{31}\) Metz, ‘Metaphor/Metonymy’, pp. 274-75.
if at all, in *L’énonciation impersonnelle is code*, and it appears indeed to be hard to determine the codical status of enunciation (even if one can isolate figurations of it), both because an earlier work like *The Imaginary Signifier* had already begun to break down codification for more figurative, open-ended movements of meaning across primary and secondary process, and because (and this is no doubt related) enunciation in *L’énonciation impersonnelle* seems inclined to turn into cinema itself (rather than be just one code among others). Enunciation comes to describe cinema’s overall status as a *Voici* (a ‘here it is’) intended manifestly to present worlds to viewers. Enunciation ends up as the term for the very act of cinema always speaking about its own conditions of existence even as its fictions pretend directly to offer themselves as un-enunciated diegetic universes. In other words, there is no code to enunciation, since all of cinema is enunciative (even if not always manifestly so). Enunciation is, as Metz says on the last page of the book’s theoretical introduction (already quoted from earlier), ‘coextensive with film, and a component part of the composition of each shot: not always marked, but acting everywhere’. Or earlier, ‘enunciation is the semiological act by which certain parts of a text speak to us of this text as an act’. Or later, it is an intentionality internal and integral to film. Ultimately, enunciation is ‘the cinema as such’.35

But if this is the case, any and all films and film sequences are citable, including even (and markedly) those moments of film that might seem unmarked (what Metz refers to, in quotation marks, as ‘neutral’ images and sounds) since the unmarked instance still is as produced, intended, and enounced as are marked filmic moments. Indeed, in his chapter on neutral sounds and images, Metz suggests that cinephilia (of the very sort that runs through his own book, with its capacious engagement with myriad films) can turn the unmarked moment into a marked one: the cinephile notices the cinematicity of cinema and thereby makes manifest what a less critical spectatorial investment (of the sort incarnated by the ordinary viewer) in diegesis can occult. All films are always in every moment enunciative – ‘Enunciation – which should not be confused with its marks and configurations [which are] always situated – is omnipresent and responsible for every detail [of a film]’ – but cinephilic knowledge focuses attention on those details and makes their enunciative qualities evident:

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32 Metz, *L’énonciation*, p. 36.
33 Ibid., p. 20.
34 Ibid., p. 60.
Enunciation remains at the level of something presupposed as long as we remain inattentive to the construction of the film. As soon as we look closer, listen closer, we note attempts at [enunciative] marking which, as meagre as they may be, prefigure a “real” [enunciative] orientation [...] The difference [between marked and unmarked] comes not from the object but from the distance we adopt in relation to it, from our more or less exacted, more or less distracted, reading of it. [...] [T]he more the public is educated, the more the neutral images diminish.36

I’ve alluded at several moments in this essay to an undeniable empirical aspect to L’énonciation impersonnelle – the sometimes random stream of citation of film titles, one after the other – but there are evident, necessary limits and limitations to this empiricism. Most immediately, the citation of films or of film fragments includes imaginary or hypothetical works (those contravening examples, for instance, that kept popping up in seminar as Metz or his students tried to imagine possibilities of cinema that wouldn’t fit the theory), with the irony that later one can, from time to time, find concrete examples of precisely those imagined cases being produced: thus, in analyzing diegetic narrators (that is, characters who adopt direct address), Metz asks us to ‘imagine the [...] construction in its pure and perfect state: for the entire length of a film, a character constantly present in the image speaks to us’,37 and he needs to make that request, he says, since ‘the exigencies of audio-visual figuration, in current narrative cinema, render improbable the full deployment of such an arrangement across the whole of a work’.38 But notice already that this is an improbability, not an impossibility. As Metz immediately cautions, ‘No one has seen all films, thought about all of them’ and in fact, certain films of Godard or Straub-Huillet approach this possibility of a cinema given over to characters who speak in direct address for excessively long periods of time (albeit not for the whole film, but again that’s not an impossibility). Clearly, nothing necessarily would prevent such imagining from concretizing, from taking on empirical existence. There can be no completion to the act of citation, then, short of citing all of cinema. As Metz declares on the last page of the theoretical introduction to L’énonciation, his guided tour is driven by no ‘concern for exhaustivity’. Earlier, The Imaginary Signifier had referred what it pointedly called a

36 Ibid., pp. 168-69.
37 Ibid., p. 48 (my emphasis).
38 Ibid., p. 48.
‘problem’ of research: ‘the problem of the status and the list’. If a ‘first temptation is to plunge immediately into “extensive” work, to aspire to an exhaustive inventory – a list’, Metz admits that: ‘At the stage I have now reached in the writing of this text I have as yet no idea (I mean this literally, in all honesty) of the “table” of cinematic figures I shall end up with, even assuming that I’m heading towards a table – which I am rather beginning to doubt.’ In like fashion, the itinerary of L’énonciation offers no tabular finality, no taxonomic completion, no enumerative codification. Thus, Metz speaks at one point of ‘the necessity to not close off the inventory of enunciation. Even though it is governed by a certain number of fundamental positions and has its own logic, even though it does not derive from some pure and infinite freedom, it offers combinations which remain very numerous.

There was, as Roland Barthes noted, a gesture toward scientificity in Metz, but it is also one that doubled itself in dream, desire, fancy, and fantasy. And L’énonciation is certainly a book given over to expressions of cinephilic affect. We might say that, certainly by the time of his later works, Metz was little inclined towards the type of statement that exhaustively enumerates the pertinent features of a concept in the form of an explicit, independent proposition. He was more interested in the phenomena than in the naming process, and his doctrinal apparatus was often only gradually put together, via a series of slips and slides (condensations/displacements), rather than being assembled all at once and once and for all, according to a directly conceptual procedure commonly seen as the only possible form that intellectual ‘rigour’ can take. L’énonciation offers an odd regime of writing: obsessional and happy-go-lucky, meticulous and inexplicit, punctilious and wide-ranging.

I say ‘We might say that’ but Metz himself already did. A confession: my last sentences – from ‘We might say that Metz was little inclined towards the type of statement that exhaustively enumerates the pertinent features of a concept’, etcetera, etcetera, onwards – are actually taken from Metz’s own description in The Imaginary Signifier of Freud’s writing enterprise and its complicated relationship to scientificity. For me, the borrowing works well and works especially well for the strange, evocative text that is Metz’s last book; a curious book, and resonant for me because of that.

40 Ibid.
41 Metz, L’énonciation, p. 11.
About the author

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