Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema

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17. “Theorize”, he says...’

Christian Metz and the Question of Enunciation: A Theory in (Speech) Acts

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**Abstract**

This chapter discusses the theoretical foundations and productivity of Metz’s reflection on filmic enunciation by commenting on the principal developments in his thinking. The essay thus aims to reinscribe the models proposed by Metz in their context by showing how they are echoed, often implicitly, in other contemporary approaches (or how they are distinct from them), including the field of film criticism. Further, Metz’s writing is itself examined at an enunciative level in order to observe the principles according to which the semiologist constructs his object of study and envisions the scholar’s position, but also to reveal Metz’s inclination to exhibit – through a performative step – the situation of the discursive enunciation that he utters.

**Keywords**: film semiotics/film semiology, enunciation theory, cinephilia, filmic reflexivity, metaphor/metonymy, film criticism

While I intend to approach the ‘question of enunciation’ in Christian Metz’s reflections on cinema, it is almost necessary to point out that I in no way mean to question the validity of the concept of enunciation. That would imply a challenge to the methodological frame of the concept, whereas I am personally convinced of its productivity in the field of film studies, even if I agree that it doesn’t have the wind in its sails nowadays (to put it mildly). Indeed, I have tested the relevance of the enunciative approach in many case studies, admittedly making a few adjustments to the models proposed by Metz and combining them with other approaches. The serious hesitations expressed by David Bordwell or by Jean-Marie Schaeffer are
well known; because of its linguistic derivation, they consider the notion of ‘enunciation’ too strictly pledged to verbal language to be of any relevance in the framework of film studies (except, as Schaeffer admits, for analyzing the voice-over process, a topic that has especially interested me⁶). It is true that, in some cases, the notion of ‘enunciation’ should not be applied too literally – but in some cases it seems appropriate to me, for the verbal is indeed one of the components of the filmic discourse, or, to express it in Metzian words, one of the ‘matters of cinematic expression’ (even if he himself tended at times to mask this point when dealing with enunciation).

In any case, the principles developed in the frame of enunciation theories have made it possible to look beyond the immanence of textual systems, which is so specific to semiology, and to open up the debate to include the communication situation, or at least its inscription in the filmic text. The followers of the enunciative approach propose that a production can be understood through the traces of its own creation and that a film resorts to various ways of addressing the spectator. In my opinion, these considerations retain all of their relevance in the contemporary multimedia context.

Especially nowadays, even in the dominant Hollywood cinema, which is supposedly governed by enunciative ‘transparency’, the proximity in

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¹ Bordwell dismisses this kind of approach quickly: ‘Enunciation theory has provided a major impetus for the dissection of film style […]. Yet because a film lacks equivalents for the most basic aspects of verbal activity, I suggest that we abandon the enunciation account.’ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1985), p. 26. ‘It is the same thing for the notions of enunciator, of statement, and so forth. To attempt to apply tools of analysis of this type to the cinematographic device, that is, to propose to analyze “the work that one does when one reads a film”, is to take the wrong object.’ Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Why Fiction?* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010 [1999]), p. 273. Here, Schaeffer quotes a sentence from Roger Odin, whose assumption he finds groundless. On the differences between the models of Schaeffer and Odin, both applied to cinema, see my critical review of their most important work on these matters: Alain Boillat, ‘Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* / Roger Odin: *De la fiction*, *Iris*, 30 (2004), pp. 158-67.


³ Looking at the notion of ‘transparency’ through the overlapping perspectives of theories coming respectively from linguistics and film studies is interesting: André Bazin, in a metaphysical perspective, advocated ‘transparency’ in a way quite incompatible with Metz’s approach (the latter underlines both the interest and the limits of this ‘cosmophanic’ approach in the section of ‘The Imaginary Signifier’ entitled ‘On the idealist theory of the cinema’) which, following the filmologists, considers the issue of realism in terms of effect and not of image ontology; see *Psychoanalysis and Cinema. The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. by Celia Britton and others (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982 [1977]), 1-87 (pp. 52-53). However, at the time of Metz’s work, the notion of transparency was also studied by linguists, whose intentions
the same film of heterogeneous picture regimes encourages the spectator to question the enunciative aspect of what he is watching and listening to. These regimes are characterized, for instance, by images of substandard quality whose otherness is made clear (e.g. when characters use their cell phones to film or watch images, or when we see the view of a surveillance camera or of a drone, shown on a diegetic screen and including the image's metadata). I will mention here, using tools provided by enunciation theories and without going into more detail, two examples I recently discussed. First, flashbacks introduced by the viewing of recordings from a surveillance camera inside a casino in Contagion (Steven Soderbergh, USA/UAE 2011). In this example, the shifts regarding the diegetic origin of the gaze could be related to the ‘metalepsis’ in the sense of Genette.4 Second, the various forms of found footage common in contemporary horror cinema, which consist partly or entirely of shots obtained by protagonists who are the victims of a threat and which are filmed using amateur techniques.5

How does the film construct the discursive source responsible for the picture and sound recordings? And to whom is the audiovisual representation addressed? These are questions that often lead one to think about strategies that make the source of filmic communication part of the diegesis. I find that enunciation theories can contribute to the study of contemporary audiovisual productions, with their strong multimedia component. I agree with Metz, who wrote in his 1993 preface to Le Signifiant imaginaire about the weakening of psychoanalysis in the humanities in favour of cognitivism, that ‘it is right that things move forward (therefore that they change), and they don’t cancel what preceded them and made them feasible, and they incidentally coexist with them’.6 I would therefore position myself in the

were to take into account the pragmatic dimension of speech. For example, François Récanati, who has taught language philosophy at the EHESS since 1975 – at the same time and in the same institutional frame as Metz – published his lessons in a book significantly entitled La transparence et l’énonciation (Paris: Seuil, 1979). For the epigones of speech act theoreticians (Récanati claims to be a follower of Austin and Searle), the doctrine of ‘transparency’ serves as a foil, but the debate about the legitimacy of the notion helps to inscribe it among the objects of study of enunciation theory. Christian Metz, referring to pragmatics, which considers the signs as ‘reflexive’ or ‘transparent’, clarifies, in brackets: ‘These are the words that are used, and their encounter with the ones that we consider is striking’, in L’énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991), p. 177.

perspective of the history of cinematic theories, with the goal of redrawing and discussing Christian Metz’s path through theories of enunciation. In doing so, I will also attempt to grasp how his thoughts and writings on cinema are inspired by principles proposed by the linguist Emile Benveniste.

With these issues in mind, two stages of Metz’s work can be outlined: the first one is a linguistic model, used in 1977 for the *Imaginary Signifier*; the second one is an ‘impersonal’ model elaborated in his last work, *L’énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film*, published in 1991 and evidencing a new position. Having widely discussed elsewhere the theoretical productiveness of the ideas expressed in the *Impersonal Enunciation*, and knowing that this text is examined in this volume in an essay by Dana Polan, I will focus on the first stage, trying to also let Metz speak for himself, through his texts.

**The Underlying ‘Voice’ of the Pneumatic Drill**

My goal here is to consider Metz’s texts on enunciation from the perspective of enunciation, and to show how much the question of ‘Subjectivity in Language’ (to quote the title of Benveniste’s famous essay) goes deep into Metzian writing itself, which is haunted by the reflexive issue of what Benveniste calls the ‘capacity of the speaker to posit himself as “subject”’.

Indeed, it is noticeable that Metz accurately locates his writings within the enunciative situation that they belong to; in other words, the place that the current project occupies in the author’s own theoretical trajectory is reflected in the writing. This is why the later (French) editions come with prefaces that are updated with each edition, and why the essays are carefully dated and introduced by Metz’s methodological explanation, which clarifies the position of the theoretician. In the manner of enunciation, which is a dynamic process producing an utterance, research is an activity that Metz approaches through its progress and that he addresses inside his texts, opting for – as D.N. Rodowick also notes – a ‘meta-theoretical’ position. So goes the introduction of the chapter entitled ‘The Investigator’s Imaginary’ from *The Imaginary Signifier*:


I ask myself: what in fact is the object of this text? What is the driving uncertainty without which I should not have the desire to write it, and thus would not be writing it? What is my imaginary at this moment? What is it that I am trying, even without illusions, to bring to a conclusion?  

In addition to being written in the first person and making use of deixis (this text, this moment), the essay also thematizes the very process of writing; the theoretician projects himself in his text and reflects himself while reflecting on the topic. This anchoring in the specific context of theoretical production is also true for quotations of other authors. For instance, Metz tells us that ‘a concept always goes back to the place of its elaboration in the history of knowledge, even, and especially, if it is to be carried over to another field’. However obvious this might be on a methodological level, it is quite important to be reminded of such a statement, particularly in the context of the google-ized circulation of concepts that, in today’s maelstrom, encounter the risk of becoming sterile labels rather than tools for reflection.

In some of the texts in The Imaginary Signifier, compiled at a time when Metz had already become interested in linguistic theories of enunciation, the inscription of the enunciator in the utterance appears to be accentuated. An emblematic example can be found in the ‘Metaphor/Metonymy, or the Imaginary Referent’ essay. In the introduction to this essay, Metz problematizes the choice of his object of study, as he often does. More precisely, he insists on the limitations in the thinking of the speaking subject. As a confession of humility in front of the seemingly enormous task, he writes: ‘This enormous question [...] involves many other aspects, including no doubt some I am completely unaware of: because he who writes (= ‘I’) derives his existence solely from such limitations.’

The distance from himself, doubly marked by the coldness of the mathematical sign and the quotation marks, contributes to a concept stating that the speaker is associated with a subject position, with a place that can be occupied by others and where the ‘I’ is only a paradigmatical form, as it happens here actualized and exhibited in its very actualization. His essay is about metonymy and metaphor, seen from a typically structuralist

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10 Christian Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 17 (emphasis in original).
11 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 153. The French text reads: ‘une notion n’est vraiment telle qu’à partir de son lieu d’élaboration dans l’histoire des savoirs, même et surtout si on compte la transporter ailleurs’ (p. 181); the italic that underlines the place’s discursive origin is his.
12 As this essay was new when the book was published in 1977, one could situate it after Metz’s earlier discussion of Benveniste’s opposition of discourse vs. story.
13 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 151.
perspective – following Jakobson, Barthes, and Genette – not as stylistic figures in the rhetorical sense but as dynamic processes associated with operations of displacement and condensation as they have been developed in the Freudian psychoanalytical field. Metz introduces this new topic in this way: ‘I have now (autumn 1975) reached a point where I can see another facet of my problem: namely, metaphorical and metonymic operations in the sequence of film images.’ One notices here the importance that Metz gives to the moment of reflection, identified with the season of a particular year.

The reader of Metz’s essay is invited to follow the author’s thinking in the supposed present of its development, like – let us now borrow a filmic example – the spectator of Godard’s La chinoise (F 1967), when he reads the words ‘A film being made [Un film en train de se faire]’. One recalls Jacques Aumont’s text on the film, centred on the issue of spectatorial address. Other examples are found in some works of Alain Tanner, a director who is strongly indebted to Godard’s cinema when it comes to the ideological implications that narrative enunciation involves. For instance, at the very beginning of The Middle of the World (F/CH 1974), Tanner uses a voice-over to explain that the ‘speech and the shape of a movie depend, on a large scale, on where and when this movie is made, and in which circumstances’ and that ‘this movie has been shot in 1974, in a time of normalization’. Thus, the film is almost contemporary to these Metzian reflections. This kind of discursive strategy is particularly intensified in the ‘Metaphor/Metonymy’ essay where, in a remarkable fashion, Metz cites examples derived from his own personal experience, even from his childhood, as in the example of the term ‘Roquefort’, which has entered language after a process of metonymy:

I have said that the association of ideas which resulted in the name of ‘Roquefort’ is today no longer alive. But if I know this little town, if I went there once on holiday (it was during the Occupation, I remember; I was a small boy, with my parents, and we used to go to the Aveyron every summer, in search of a few provisions) then the word will evoke a whole landscape for me, Millau and Saint-Affrique, and the stony bend in a

14 Ibid.
16 Regarding the particular enunciative aspects of the films by Alain Tanner in the 1970s, see the analysis of Le retour d’Afrique (CH/F 1973) that I made in ‘Alain Tanner: un cinema idéologique’, in Vinzenz Hediger, Jan Sahli, Alexandra Schneider, and Margrit Tröhler, Home Stories, Neue Studien zu Film und Kino in der Schweiz (Marburg: Schüren, 2001), pp. 335-46.
little street, old and steep: then I am actively retracing the path of the metonymy (not just that of my childhood) [...].

Let’s say first that, reading the hypothetical formula ‘if I went there once’, we could consider that the ‘I’ is used in the general sense. But the text that follows tells us something else, as the reader enters a recollection, between brackets that underline a change of level (Metz’s sensitivity for punctuation marks is well known). It seems that the psychoanalytical approach, which Metz says he experienced himself during therapy before referring to it in his theoretical texts on cinema, is intimately linked, because of the introspection it implies, to the emergence of a linguistic subjectivity in the writing process and perhaps to a growing sensitivity towards questions of enunciation. Metz uses the strategy of displacement precisely where he discusses the way this type of operation works in language, thus giving a performative value to his text.

He first offers as examples the words ‘Bordeaux’ and ‘tesson’, and illustrates how these words are metonymically obtained from the homonymous city and from the word ‘testa’, respectively. Having thus dealt with these words from a perspective of diachronic semantics, Metz offers to illustrate his ideas in other ways. He does so firstly by underlining his presence as enunciator, and by introducing a reference to the addressee (‘I am afraid that the reader is beginning to get tired of hearing about “earthenware” fragments and “Bordeaux”’). Next he uses an interrogative form, a purely rhetorical and phatic one that also works as a way of addressing the reader (‘Should we not move on to a different kind of metonymy, more immediately primary, or more obviously so?’). As Metz establishes in this essay, there are no primary figures for him, only figures that momentarily escape from circulation in the social space. The primary level – on which point Metz strictly follows Freud – calls for narcissism, the object becoming the Ego: ‘In which case I shall have to talk more about myself, since any example taken from a language or a cinematic code would be vitiated by the simple fact of its prior existence.’ The theoretician justifies the necessity of mentioning his personal situation, the moment when the metonymy does not yet exist in a lexicalized state; the next sentence starts with a dash (see French text) – as
if to introduce a reply – which implies an oralized form and consequently tends to inscribe the sentence in the *discourse* regime, in Benveniste’s sense, and the present tense (of the indicative mood) is immediately followed by a temporal deixis, ‘for several days now’:

So – for several days now [– *Donc, [...] depuis plusieurs jours déjà*], roughly since the time I began work on this article, a pneumatic drill in a neighbouring street has been constantly getting on my nerves, and continues to do so as I am writing this. I have got into the habit, when ‘talking’ to myself, of calling this text, whose title is not yet finally decided, the *pneumatic drill article*. [...] I do hear it and it upsets me: the word ‘persecutory’ flows spontaneously from my pen. I write in spite of this noise, and also against it. [...] In my fantasy it represents (this time by condensation) all the various obstacles – to which I am by nature cruelly sensitive – which make ‘research’ into something perpetually impossible, because of the freedom from distraction which it requires and which is almost never to be found: an act [...] which has no place within every day life but only against it: a small schizophrenia.21

The production conditions become the very theme of the theoretical discourse, thus lending the essay an almost performative function. The din of the pneumatic drill, which the author describes as *being* heard, is projected into the text as a link to a component of the physical environment of the writing. From that point, the writing becomes even more of a creative act in that it reflects the very difficulties that were encountered during the text’s own creation. This is not a pure digression: the ‘schizophrenic’ theoretician pursues the development of his example and then describes a case of condensation at the same time. The subject matter of his argument, the metonymy, is considered from the enunciative point of view before it is defined, at the end of the essay, as a ‘transfer from the speaker to the statement’.22 This metadiscourse can thus be associated with the very topic of the theory of enunciation that will lead Metz to conceptualize the *mirror* phenomenon, cinema’s reflexivity. Situated at the crossroads of psychoanalysis and linguistics, *The Imaginary Signifier* simultaneously allows the exhibition of the Ego and the staging of the discourse’s speaking subject. Thus, the example of the ‘pneumatic drill’ draws on the two fields at the same time, and their intersection is the location where the author stands. A theory *in acts*, then.

21 Ibid., pp. 161-62.
22 Ibid., p. 167.
Metz even concretely integrates the addressee in his text, as when he refers in a footnote to the comments made by the audience of his seminar from which the essay stems: students suggested other interpretations of the ‘pneumatic drill’ that would have shown its coded aspect, the way it could be related to the metaphor of a text ‘under construction’.

At all levels, construction is an issue: that of a text, and of a thought that is being built before our eyes. The author discusses and explains the position he occupies to somehow show the place of his enunciation, as he describes it accurately in his Story/Discourse essay: ‘So, for as long as it takes me to write this, I shall take up a particular listening-post in myself (not, of course, the only one), a post which will allow my “object”, the standard-issue film, to emerge as fully as possible.’

This kind of alignment between the enunciator and the utterance precisely corresponds to the subject matter of enunciation theories. A chapter of *The Imaginary Signifier* is significantly entitled ‘“Theorize”, he says…’; the inversion of the title of Marguerite Duras’s novel (and homonymous film) *Destroy, She Said* (F 1969)25 stresses the constructive approach of the theoretical initiative, and the declarative verb ‘says’ indicates the importance Metz gives to the very act of theoretical enunciation; for him, the modelling of a theory is inseparable from the elaboration of the discourse.

**Story/Discourse: An Appropriation of Benveniste’s Model**

A close look at the importance of enunciation theory in the *Imaginary Signifier* shows that it plays a relatively small role: the ‘Story/Discourse’

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23 Ibid., p. 92.
24 Ibid., p. 79.
25 Marguerite Duras, *Destroy, She Said* (New York: Grove Press, 1970). The original French title *Détruire, dit-elle* can be interpreted as the present tense or the simple past. The French homonymy of these forms (‘elle dit’) confronts the translator with a problem that is linked to the issues of enunciation that are discussed here: the simple present is related to *speech* (according to Benveniste), the simple past to *story*. Indeed, although Marguerite Duras’s title of the book is clear (it adapts two lines of the novel that are in the present tense), Barbara Bray, the translator, has chosen the past: ‘Destroy, she said’, perhaps in order to conform to the dominant practices of literary English. The same translation was used for the film’s distribution in English-speaking countries. Christian Metz’s translator chose a more literal translation by using the present tense but thereby weakened the reference to the novel’s English translation. The declarative verb (‘to say’), and therefore the underlining of the enunciation, was apparently absent from Duras’s first title. It may have come from Alain Robbe-Grillet, who was a literary consultant for the Minuit editor at the time (according to the latter in *Les derniers jours de Corinthe* [Paris: Minuit, 1994], p. 96).
essay takes up less than eight pages. It is even shorter than Benveniste’s two texts, in which he establishes the basis of what will become ‘the enunciation’ (there is a disproportion between the shortness of these texts – both Metz’s and Benveniste’s – and their legacy). The ‘Story/Discourse’ text is actually independent from the first long essay of about a hundred pages that gives the volume its title. Besides, the writing of this short article was somewhat incidental, for its origin is found in an homage volume to Benveniste, edited by Julia Kristeva and published by Le Seuil in 1975: *Langue, discours, société. Pour Emile Benveniste*, in which Metz is the only representative of the cinematic field among authors that included Barthes, Todorov, and Lévi-Strauss. Furthermore, the subtitle, ‘A Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism’, refers to a textual category that could let us consider it as a minor essay, or as the draft for an in-depth study (which was never realized, at least not by Metz). The absence of footnotes and references to other texts – even Benveniste’s aren’t referenced – suggests that this is the account of a first intuition. However, if Metz incorporated this text into the *Imaginary Signifier*, it is because he thought that a detour through the concepts of story and discourse that the linguist Benveniste had discussed had its place in the opus.

What becomes of these notions when Metz applies them to the field of cinema? First of all, he cross-breeds them with psychoanalysis while associating, on the one hand, exhibitionism and *discourse* and, on the other hand, disavowal and *story*; this double oppositional couple is then transferred to cinema, where disavowal, for Metz, characterizes the dominant fiction cinema regime – what he calls the ‘narration-representation’ regime elsewhere in the book, meaning a cinema that does not show its production operations, that makes the referential illusion come first. He describes it in this way:

> The film is not exhibitionist. I watch it, but it doesn’t watch me watching it. Nevertheless, it knows that I am watching it. But it doesn’t want to know. This fundamental disavowal is what has guided the whole of classical cinema into the paths of ‘story’ [...].

The word *story* is still in quotes, but Metz will adopt Benveniste’s usage. In fact, the semiologist of cinema resorts to Benveniste because the notions developed by the latter are convenient to Metz for repeating one of his own previous statements: that the signifier of the fiction film ‘is employed entirely to remove the traces of its own steps, to open immediately onto the

26 Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, p. 49.
27 Ibid., p. 94.
transparency of a signified, of a story [...]'. The word ‘story’ is not strictly understood in Benveniste’s sense, but the distinction the linguist proposes will allow Metz to reveal the phenomenon. One also notices that the notion of ‘fiction film’ is not defined through a semantic approach of fictionality but solely through the criterion of the signer’s transparency (which makes the term difficult to use, as I have discussed elsewhere). Above all, what Metz retains from Benveniste is the principle that distinguishes enunciation and utterance [énoncé], and which allows him to express the dynamics of the textual system. He calls it a ‘production rather than a product’. A passage from The Imaginary Signifier is emblematic of this conception:

In Emile Benveniste’s terms, the traditional film is presented as story, and not as discourse. And yet it is discourse [...], but the basic characteristics of this kind of discourse, and the very principle of its effectiveness as discourse, is precisely that it obliterates all traces of the enunciation, and masquerades as story.

The idea that a discourse (necessarily at work in every film) ‘masquerades’ as a different kind of discourse on the surface is linked to the illusionist power of cinematographic representation and to the disavowal process that Octave Mannoni discusses in his essay on theatre, entitled Clefs pour l’imaginaire [Keys to the Imaginary], with the formula: ‘I know well, but even so ... [Je sais bien, mais quand même...’]. Metz adopts this, but his idea of masquerade does not fit Benveniste’s definitions, which could explain why Metz refers to him only broadly. What really interests Metz is the story, i.e. the dominant narrative fiction film, and not the discourse, which he in some ways conceals in a masquerade exercise of the kind that he attributes to his object of study (i.e. the film), an exercise that results in a theoretical sleight of hand, so to speak. Here, Metz adopts the same point of view he had sketched in a footnote to his article entitled ‘Notes Toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative’ where, as Marie-Claire Ropars

28 Ibid., p. 40.
29 Boillat, La Fiction au cinéma, pp. 31-33.
30 Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 29.
31 Ibid., p. 91.
33 The author shows that, with the help of a ‘terminological crossbreeding’ [croisement terminologique], Metz leaves aside the specific issue of enunciation involved in the “discourse”
observed, he first mentioned Benveniste's theory, in 1966. But at that time, he distinguished in the writings of Benveniste a broad and a narrow sense of the word ‘discourse’, leading him to put the narrow sense aside, thus excluding the story vs. discourse opposition. At that point, Metz already aimed to transform the discourse into story. His later rejection of the deictic conception of filmic enunciation — although truly useful when examining the verbal dimension of a film — would also partly be based on a desire to avoid the formal apparatus of the discourse, whose conception is too strongly based on the oral communication model, whereas cinema allows no reversibility of the enunciator-addressee poles. If Metz concedes that the story ‘can assume the appearance of discourse’ and can even refer to an ‘oral text, fully and exclusively oral, such as there is on the radio, and as there has been for centuries with the bards and other storytellers’, he does not explore this idea at all because, according to him, cinema is of a different order. Only with the work of the Quebecois researcher Germain Lacasse would the oral dimension of cinema be taken seriously at a theoretical level, from the times of the early cinema’s bonimenteur (the moving picture lecturer) to today’s dubbing actor.

The definition of the story/discourse opposition given in The Imaginary Signifier with the help of the formula ‘in Emile Benveniste’s terms’ is a tricky one: indeed, the two planes of enunciation, to which the linguist...
proposes to distribute the French verbal tenses, correspond to ‘two systems which are distinct and complementary’; they ‘both are used in competition with each other and remain at the disposal of each speaker’. According to Benveniste, these two categories are therefore mutually exclusive; one can find indeed, in a single utterance, an alternation from one to another, but one must therefore deduce that the formal system has changed. In fact, Christian Metz anticipated the shift of the ‘discourse vs. story’ opposition from the linguistic field to the communication theory of storytelling as it would be elaborated by Gérard Genette, starting with *Nouveau discours du récit* published in 1983. For Genette, story is a subcategory of discourse, a provisional suspension of the enunciation traces.

There is, however, a brief passage in Benveniste’s essay where he excludes from his analysis an aspect of the problem – indirect speech – which he describes in these terms: ‘historical enunciation can on occasion merge with discourse to make a third type of enunciation in which discourse is reported in terms of an event and is transposed onto the historical plane’. This scenario opens up the discussion to conceptions of polyphony, as developed by Oswald Ducrot (in the linguistic field) and Jean Châteauvert (for cinema); it allows a conjunction of the two regimes nearer to the Metzian conception.

**The Ideological Critique: A Repressed ‘Discourse’**

Faced with Metz’s appropriation of certain concepts proposed in Benveniste’s *Problems in General Linguistics*, one can make the following hypothesis: *under the guise* (so as to remain inside the trope of masquerade) of notions

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40 On this subject, see Sylvie Patron, ‘Homonymie chez Genette, ou la réception de l’opposition histoire/discours dans les théories du récit de fiction’, in *Relire Benveniste. Réceptions actuelles des Problèmes de linguistique générale*, ed. by Emilie Brunet and Rudolf Mahrer (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia, 2011), pp. 97-121. The author underlines the fact that the first appropriation of Benveniste’s categories by Genette in the field of narratology (before the relation of the two words forming this oppositional couple had been redefined) goes back to his essay ‘Frontières du récit’ published in *Communications*, 8 (1966), pp. 158-69, that is, in the same journal in which Metz published the first version of his ‘grande syntagmatique de la bande-images’ (pp. 126-30).
coming from a discipline perfectly legitimized on a theoretical plane, Metz transfers the linguistic issues to an opposition between the semblance of fiction and the underlying materiality of the signifier. Thus his conception is the indirect echo of those contemporaneous debates in film theory that posited an ideological critique of the cinematographic apparatus and its productions. Metz does mention his precursors in another passage of *The Imaginary Signifier*, when he refers to a conceptual field coming from psychoanalysis, but without reference to any specific article: ‘In France during the years following 1968, the *Cahiers du Cinéma* team played an important part in the emergence of this new line of investigation: I am thinking in particular […] of Jean-Louis Comolli or Pascal Bonitzer’s contributions.\(^{44}\)

Following Bonitzer’s essay entitled ‘Films/Politics’, Jean-Louis Comolli criticized Costa-Gavras’s film *The Confession* (F/I 1970) in October 1970, judging it politically unworthy in the sense that (unlike the Straubs with *Othon*, FRG 1969) Costa-Gavras delivered a film that ‘contains no productive work at the level of its signifiers and thus – since it is one and the same work – never calls into question the conditions of the production/écriture/diffusion/reading of the film’.\(^{45}\)

In other words (which Metz borrows from Benveniste), one could say that Comolli’s critique focuses on the film’s failure to inscribe itself in the discourse regime. In his essay, Comolli in fact starts with a politicized version of Metz’s interpretation of enunciation: ‘It is precisely here, in the relation film/politics that we can distinguish not only the place of films in the dominant relations to production and in the ideology which dominates in their name, but also the place of the films’ spectators […]’.\(^{46}\) This is opposed to a masking process: the one that the dominant norms produce through a representation mode defined as ‘bourgeois’ (Bonitzer wrote that ‘the bourgeoisie has to instill its principles by masked means\(^{47}\)). This point of view reverses that of Metz, who favours the dominant form in his research, although the principle of a dichotomy between exhibition and concealment is similar. The interweaving of story and discourse in *The Imaginary Signifier* allows Metz to consider filmic practices that do not

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\(^{44}\) Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, p. 36.


\(^{46}\) Comolli, ‘Film/Politics (2)’, p. 163.

\(^{47}\) Pascal Bonitzer, ‘Film/politique’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 222 (July 1970), 33-7 (p. 33). Issue 223, which is in between the two texts that are cited here, contains an interview with Straub and Huillet about the film *Othon*.
strictly belong to ‘fiction film’ but which he takes into account – and which he dismisses at the same time – without having to interact with the political positions of the cinephiles. In a footnote to the interview conducted by Marc Vernet and Daniel Percheron, published in the *Essais sémiotiques* in 1977, Metz retrospectively clarifies (after having stated his interest in films such as the Straubs’ *Moses and Aron* [FRG/AU/F/I 1975]):

> It is basically possible that my cautious attitude, deliberately standing in the ‘background’, owes less to the very avant-garde production rather than to the ideology alongside, fairly hasty and that often escorts them (not always) in manifestoes and that I find a bit too prophetical and idealistic, not exempt from certain theoretical ingenuities, and in other cases unpleasantly terrorist or overexcited.48

The *discourse* category is not approached as such in *The Imaginary Signifier*, in the sense that it stands in the shadow of the *story*, which constitutes the norm. Yet the discourse category supplies the theoretician – who has taken a step aside from polemics – with a tool that constitutes a token of seriousness and serenity, and which represents a scientific caution that allows him to stand outside of the field of film criticism.

Benveniste’s notions are in fact considered in relation to a split dis/belief in fiction, which is omnipresent in *The Imaginary Signifier* and which leads Metz to a certain scepticism toward the idea that the unveiling of the production conditions of the image is a political gesture. It is interesting to note here that in *The Imaginary Signifier*, he discusses several reflexive processes such as the ‘film within the film’ or the ‘voice-over commentary’, of which he says: ‘The distance it establishes between the action and ourselves comforts our feeling that we are not duped by that action: thus reassured (behind that rampart), we can allow ourselves to be duped by it a bit longer.’49 This statement neutralizes any automatic association between the marks of enunciation and processes of distancing. It echoes Metz’s analysis of the *mise en abyme* in Fellini’s *8½* (I/F 1963), where there is a perfect correspondence of the ‘film within the film’ and the film itself.50

Metz’s interest in reflexivity is noticeable in his last work, to the point where he reduces all of the enunciation phenomena to this issue.

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49 Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, p. 73–74 (for all these quotes).
Significantly, it is in the chapter dedicated to the exhibition of the cinematic apparatus that Metz revisits the ideological critique of the 1970s and reaffirms his personal distance from it, while deconstructing one of its founding principles:

We could assume that the visibility, the highlighting of the cinema apparatus – its ‘denunciation’, its ‘deconstruction’, as the Seventies used to say, forged with militant subversion and ideology – consist of the ultimate enunciative act [marque d’énonciation], for if we follow the vulgate of that time, films let us see and listen to the ones who made them.51

The quotation marks suggest the incompatibility of the quoted conception with his own, and the word ‘vulgate’ points to its dogmatism; one should also notice the subject of the verb ‘to say’, that is ‘the Seventies’, therefore an indistinct mass of enunciators from the same period. As he did in the The Imaginary Signifier, Metz mentions this approach in order to underline its naiveté. By emphasizing the historical distance from it, he wants to highlight the gap between his own scholarly position and that of the ideological critique’s representatives. In the theoretical assessment at the end of the book, he says about ‘the Seventies’ – once again a term that encompasses the period while avoiding any individuation of the authors – that they ‘wanted to unmask the lie of an absent enunciation and to describe the mechanisms of this concealment’ and that ‘this conception of a self-produced story, nobody believed in (except its fierce opponents)’.52 Metz takes up theory in the same way as he talks about cinematic fiction: he dismantles its aspects of belief while remaining at a good distance from his object of study.

An ‘Impersonal’ Model: The Instances of Technological Mediation

During the 1976-1986 decade, precisely when the theories of filmic enunciation were on the rise, Metz did not produce any new text that resonated with these contemporaneous theoretical debates. He mainly contented himself with retrospective comments on the semiology of the two previous decades. During this period, the enunciation frame he built showed its productivity through several case studies and found its place in the context of cinema

51 Metz, L’énonciation, p. 85.
52 Ibid., p. 176 (emphasis in original).
education. One notes in particular Metz’s absence from issue 38 of *Communications* (1983), which brings together the main theoreticians who wrote on the topic of enunciation – his absence here is especially conspicuous since he had previously edited issue 15 (‘Image analysis’ [L’analyse de l’image]) as well as issue 23 (‘Psychoanalysis and cinema’ [Psychanalyse et cinéma]).

As I have tried to demonstrate, Metz’s interest in Benveniste was mostly circumstantial, and the broad sense in which he uses the story/discourse opposition in *The Imaginary Signifier* attests to his reluctance to apply this type of linguistic terminology more systematically to cinema. This is why he did not take part in the theoretical developments *The Imaginary Signifier* gave birth to, for the authors following him chose a description of deixis that Metz found groundless, or at least incompatible with his own methodological principles. He later developed this position in the preface to Francesco Casetti’s French version of *Inside the Gaze* (this text also appeared later in the American edition of Casetti’s essay first published in Italian), in which he praises the work of his colleague and friend while pointing out that he does not always agree with his way of thinking. The formal conception of the filmic *deixis* developed by Casetti had an effect on Metz’s desire to elaborate, in *The Impersonal Enunciation*, an argument that he had already announced in the preface to Casetti’s book: ‘In reading *Dentro lo sguardo*, I decided that my rather long period of leisurely incubation was over, and that I should tackle the study of filmic enunciation in a future work myself.’ The notion of ‘impersonal enunciation’ was therefore conceived in reaction to a deictic notion of filmic enunciation and to borrowings from the psychoanalytical field – that is, in reaction to the very ideas whose foundations Metz himself laid in *The Imaginary Signifier*. In his preface to *Inside the Gaze*, Dudley Andrew underlines how important and transitional Casetti’s book was for Metz’s career: ‘In effect Casetti helped bring Metz back to his home in semiotics and linguistics, after the Freudian excursions of *The Imaginary Signifier* and the unpublished opus on jokes.’

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53 A French Swiss example, alongside Michel Marie or Alain Bergala, is the booklet written by François Albera for the Centre of semiological research of the University of Neuchâtel, *Problèmes de l’énonciation au cinéma* (Travaux du Centre de Recherches Sémiologiques, 45 [February 1984]), and whose first chapter reads ‘The formal device of the filmic enunciation [L’appareil formel de l’énonciation filmique].’


55 Ibid., p. xiii.

appropriately mentions the work *L'esprit et les mots*, which Metz intended to publish in order to extend the Freudian reflection on the ‘Witz’. The text’s manuscript is dated January 1986 and was rejected by its publisher: regarding Metz’s biography, one can hypothesize that the great disappointment Metz must have felt at the failure of this project – which was evidence of his desire to inscribe his research in the very heart of a theoretical field that, until then, he had only called on from time to time in order to approach cinema – was one of the main reasons why he reoriented his work at the end of the 1980s. From that point, he focused on components he judged more specifically cinematic (the film and its mirrors ‘reflect’ nothing but cinema itself), and he rejected linguistic phenomena and their interpretation in terms of manifestations of the unconscious.

Although Metz pays special attention to the process of communication in his reflections on the ‘mot d’esprit’ (‘the spiritual effect can only happen if two unconsciouses meet, the one that the “mot d’esprit” objectifies and the one of each listener at the moment of listening’57), he then abandons all investigation of the interaction between two speaking subjects. Rejecting the notion of an anthropomorphic enunciator, he ‘turns the page’ in order to give way to ‘enunciation landscapes’ [*paysages d’énonciation*]58 that are specific to cinematic representations. Metz’s reaction came quickly, since the new perspective adopted in *The Impersonal Enunciation* had already been sketched by the end of 1987, appearing in the first issue of *Vertigo*, edited by Jacques Gerstenkorn.59 Metz also presented it in an interview with Michel Marie and Marc Vernet following the Cerisy Symposium in 1989, which was dedicated to Metz’s theory.60 Metz’s goal here is to elaborate a formal theory based only on manifestations of filmic reflexivity, erasing any anthropoid conception. His new perspective is clearly stated in the introduction to his book on enunciation, which was published in English in the journal *New Literary History* (a few months after its first French version appeared in *Vertigo*):

58 The table of contents of *L’énonciation impersonnelle* shows a list of cases rather than a wish to propose theoretical principles that would apply to all kinds of reflexive practices: Metz indeed presents his work as a ‘guided tour’ through ‘enunciation landscapes’. The lyrical aspect of the word ‘landscape’, very rare in Metz’s previous work, appears very clearly in the title of the last part of the book: ‘Four steps into the clouds (theoretical flight)’.
'For what is enunciation basically? It is not necessarily, nor always, “I-HERE-NOW”; it is, more generally speaking, the ability some utterances have to fold up in some places, to appear here and there as in relief, to lose this thin layer of themselves that carries a few engraved indications of another nature (or another level), regarding the production and not the product [...].'

The contribution made by this proposition appears considerable to me, in that it allows a return to the machine-like dimension of the cinematic apparatus, something that had been discussed in The Imaginary Signifier, but still independently of enunciation issues. Nevertheless, I would say that, on the one hand, the idea of the signifiers’ materiality is not discussed fully in L’énonciation impersonnelle, especially with regard to the soundtrack. On the other hand, the rejection of anthropomorphism (linked for Metz to the category of persons in a linguistic sense) is too radical: it diminishes the importance of the verbal in cinema – despite the importance Metz gives to different types of voices – as well as the fact that the enunciative organization of films often adheres to a fictive humanizing strategy through the constitution of discursive sources (especially voice-over narrators) that the spectator has to assimilate to the governing principle of the filmic enunciation (the ‘mega-narrator’ in the words of André Gaudreault, who proposes a hierarchy of the different discursive sources). In the chapter entitled ‘Le film-machine’ of his book Un monde à notre image [A world in our own image], François Jost made relevant

62 Metz goes back to this aspect of his work when he writes: ‘I had placed myself as it were beyond these distinctions [between film, spectator and code], on a sort of common ground which included them all at once, and which was none other than the cinema-machine itself, envisaged in its conditions of possibility’, Metz, The Imaginary Signifier, p. 152.
64 André Gaudreault, From Plato to Lumière: Narration and Monstration in Literature and Cinema (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009 [1988]).
comments on the limits of the Metzian model, writing that ‘if the text is a thing, we can’t even talk of enunciation’ and that ‘this concept only has a purpose inside an anthropomorphising way of thinking, assuming that it refers to a human presence, situated outside the novel or the film and responsible for the narrative discourse’.65 Besides, Marie-Claire Ropars underlined how much Metz tends to objectify the film in *The Impersonal Enunciation*, thus implying precisely what semiology has been accused of, that is, a confinement to textuality that precludes any account of the communication context.66

However, it seems to me that it would be useful to consider the process of filmic enunciation in the diversity of its manifestations, thus reconciling the deictic conception of enunciation (useful for studying the words spoken in films or in the movie theatre, words that are inseparable from the audience’s visualization of the speaker) with an impersonal conception applied to the different materials of cinematic expression when they are displayed as artefacts. The degree of the enunciative marks will nevertheless always depend on the perception by a specific audience in a specific institutional context and at a specific time (hence the importance of Roger Odin’s semio-pragmatics or of the reception studies that Francesco Casetti later turned to). Thus, the respective importance of *discourse* and of *story* cannot be measured solely from the text but is constituted in the act of reception. However, this view by no means precludes an enunciative perspective on cinema, ‘where everything depends on machines’, as Metz writes.67 Such a perspective focuses on the purely technical aspects of the medium and especially on the degree of perceptibility, within the film, of the traces left by the processes of recording, production, and transmission of the audiovisual information. All of this remains relevant in the digital era where a spectator (who is somewhat aware of contemporary technologies) can understand all components of representation as ‘generated’ (as in CGI) – if they are ‘generated’, it is by someone or something. Now that the aesthetics and popularization

65 François Jost, *Un monde à notre image. Enonciation, cinéma, télévision* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1992), p. 31. I would personally say that this presence can be thought of as being inside the discourse because of the very discourse that produces this anthropomorphic effect.

66 ‘If enunciation is only a puckering of the film that shows itself as being so, and therefore designates cinema itself, wouldn’t there be then a withdrawal into the refuge of a cinematographic specificity, in a way that cinema could free itself from the communication model, throwing it back outside the film, in language?’ Ropars, ‘Christian Metz et le mirage de l’énonciation’, p. 107.

of the latest technologies rest on a logic of transparent immediacy or a logic of hypermediacy (two sides of the same phenomenon, as were story and discourse for Metz), the degree to which technological mediation is displayed or concealed – the very topic that interested Metz – is more than ever a key factor in the appreciation and the study of cinematic productions, including their ideological dimension.

Translated from French by Sylvain Portmann and Susie Trenka

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68 In my opinion, the phenomena envisioned from the perspective of a contemporary numerical culture by Bolter and Grusin clearly echo those discussed by Christian Metz in an enunciative perspective for the narrower field of cinema; see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Remediation. Understanding New Media (Boston: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 21-44. Doubtless, a look back at certain concepts or methods, employed a few decades ago by theoreticians of filmic enunciation, would enrich the contemporary approaches by allowing for a more accurate analysis of media representations, taking into account the specificities of their discursive organization.
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