18. Personal Enunciation: Presences of Absences

Dominique Bluher

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Abstract
In his last book, *L’énonciation impersonnelle*, Christian Metz tackles the question of enunciation in cinema in order to show that filmic enunciation is not anthropomorphic but textual, impersonal, and metadiscursive. According to Metz, filmic enunciation ‘is the semiological act through which some parts of the text speak to us of this text as an act’. In consequence, ‘the last I is always outside of the text’. Discussing autobiographical cinema, this chapter explores how Metz’s conception of impersonal enunciation can be reconciled with autobiographical discourses that seem opposed to his theory, and how some of its shortcomings can be overcome by resorting to Vivian Sobchack’s semiotic phenomenology of film experience and Käte Hamburger’s phenomenological narrative theory.

Keywords: film semiotics/film semiology, enunciation theory, narratology, autobiographical discourse, documentary film, film essay

In his last book, *L’énonciation impersonnelle*,¹ Christian Metz tackles the question of enunciation in cinema in order to show that filmic enunciation differs from conceptions of enunciation in linguistics and narratology. Rather than conceiving enunciation as anthropomorphic, Metz shows that filmic enunciation – as with the enunciation in any monodirectional, unchangeable discourse (be it written or audiovisual) – is textual, impersonal, and metadiscursive. ‘[Enunciation] is not necessarily, and not always “I-Here-Now”,’ Metz writes.

[It] is more generally the capacity of many utterances [énoncés] to fold at certain places, to appear here and there in relief, to shed a thin film of themselves on which is engraved some indications of another nature (or of another level) that concerns the production and not the product, or if one prefers, indications inserted in the product from the other side. Enunciation is the semiotic act through which some parts of the text speak to us of this text as an act.²

And further:

Enunciation is always enunciation about the film. Metadiscursive rather than deictic, it informs us not about something outside the text, but rather about a text that includes within itself its origin [foyer] and aim [visée]. [...] This ‘metalanguage’ (which should be put in scare quotes) is sometimes a commentary and other times a reflection of the film, or even both simultaneously.³

If the filmic enunciation is not anthropomorphic but always a metadiscursive enunciation about the film, ‘the last I is always outside of the text’. However, Metz adds, also in parentheses, ‘that it often leaves traces, and that its act IS the text itself. [...] One never catches the last I [...] [T]his feeling of a site of absence, paradoxical figures of origin, even more “absent” in unchangeable discourses that exclude a response.⁴

Although I was attending Metz’s seminar when he was presenting the work on filmic enunciation that would culminate in the publication of his book, I did not know at the time that my research would lead me to study autobiographical cinema. Alas, I never had the opportunity to discuss with him the case of autobiographical films. Hence, this paper seeks to conduct this discussion with Metz in absentia. How can I reconcile Metz’s theory of the impersonal enunciation with autobiographical discourses that seem so diametrically opposed to his theory? One key point of contention is Philippe Lejeune’s now-canonical definition of the autobiographical pact – ‘[i]n order [...] to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical’.⁵ Lejeune also stresses that

² Ibid., p. 20 (emphasis in original).
³ Ibid., p. 30 (emphasis in original).
⁴ Ibid., pp. 189-90 (emphasis in original).
‘[a]utobiography is not a guessing game: it is in fact exactly the opposite. […] The autobiographical pact is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the name of the author on the cover.’

The criterion of identity between the author, the narrator, and the main character has equally been foregrounded by the literary scholar Elizabeth W. Bruss. In her article focusing on filmic autobiography, Bruss distinguishes three defining parameters for autobiographical expression: ‘truth-value’, ‘identity-value’, and ‘act-value’. Identity-value equals Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, since ‘[i]n autobiography, the logically distinct roles of author, narrator, and protagonist are conjoined, with the same individual occupying a position both in the context, the associated “scene of writing,” and within the text itself.’ Act-value refers to the fact that ‘[a]utobiography is a personal performance, an action that exemplifies the character of the agent responsible for that action and how it is performed’. And finally, truth-value corresponds to Lejeune’s ‘referential pact’ or ‘veridiction pact’, which is generally coextensive with the autobiographical pact, and whose formula, according to Lejeune, would be: ‘I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.’ According to Bruss, the author also ought to commit to telling the truth, and the veracity of the facts related can or could be verifiable: ‘An autobiography purports to be consistent with other evidence; we are conventionally invited to compare it with other documents that describe the same events (to determine its veracity) and with anything the author may have said or written on other occasions (to determine its sincerity).’

In written autobiography, the identity between the author, narrator, and protagonist can easily be created by a simple homonymy. The names of the narrator and protagonist thus function as traces. In the case of film, we might also consider including the voice and the body of the filmmaker,

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6 Ibid., pp. 13-14.
8 Ibid., p. 300
9 Ibid.
10 Lejeune, The Autobiographical Pact’, p. 22. Lejeune also points out that ‘[t]he oath rarely takes such an abrupt and total form; it is a supplementary proof of honesty to restrict it to the possible (the truth such as it appears to me, inasmuch as I can know it, etc., making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.), and to indicate explicitly the field to which this oath applies (the truth about such and such an aspect of my life, not committing myself in any way about some other aspect)’ (p. 22).
which can lead to the creation of very interesting hybrids. Just as for Metz, for Lejeune and Bruss the ‘last I’ – the author – is always extratextual, but there are traces that allow the text to be identified as autobiographical. Nonetheless, the homonymy with the author can only be determined by leaving the text per se, by taking into account peri- or paratextual indications: only information given on book covers, in forewords, blurbs, publicity, posters, leaflets, DVD covers, or during the opening and end credits enables us to understand that the name of the author corresponds to that of the protagonist and that the filmmaker is the person in front of and/or behind the camera. In short, any definition and recognition of an autobiography can only be pragmatic. Hence, the autobiographical pact or the identity-value implies that the spectator of an autobiographical film is invited to consider the enunciating voice not as a purely textual entity, as is the case in fiction, but to perceive the originating I as real and the facts shown as ‘true’ and referring to the life of the filmmaker. Like all factual discourses, autobiography institutes a referential reading, or a ‘documentarising reading’ (lecture documentarisante), to use Roger Odin’s term. The author of an autobiography is indeed liable for the truthfulness of the facts and can be sued and required to remove names or parts. Yet, it has to be noted that the author’s liability in this case is negotiated outside the text and after the screening, in the courtroom or in the press.

But even if the autobiographical pact is established, the spectator is free to adopt a ‘wrong’ reading strategy or to switch from one strategy to the other during the screening. Literary critics like Käte Hamburger, Dorrit Cohn, or Michael Riffaterre have tried to identify the markers of fictionality in literary texts. However, all textual indicators of fictionality can be

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13 Strangely enough, I know of no examples of filmmakers being prosecuted for defamation by people depicted in their films. But several literary autobiographies made waves throughout the press in France: Claude Lanzmann obtained a court order to have certain passages deleted in his ex-brother-in-law Serge Rezvani’s Le testament amoureux (1981), Paul Ricœur had his name removed in Christophe Donner’s L’esprit de vengeance (1992), and Camille Laurens’ husband tried to have her L’amour (2003) prohibited from publication, though unsuccessfully. Are filmmakers more careful, or do they self-censor themselves harder to avoid troubles? For his film From Somalia with Love (F 1982), Frédéric Mitterrand has written in an Oulipian tour de force, a lipogrammic commentary spoken by himself that doesn’t reveal the gender of the lost love he is mourning.

invalidated by the simple fact that the fictional narrative can feign the appearance of ‘serious’ narratives, and vice versa. Factual narrative can borrow discursive patterns from fiction, and always has. Conversely, the impact of fake documentaries or mockumentaries, for instance, depends on how successfully they fake the markers of factuality.

On the other hand, the viewing of an autobiographical film calls for another type of attitude, attention, and effort from the spectator, whose expectations are most likely informed even before entering the movie theatre. One usually goes to see a nonfiction or an autobiographical film, *en connaissance de cause*, with the knowledge that the movie we are going to see will not be a thriller, a romantic comedy, or a science fiction film. As Odin argues, the spectator produces different reading modes depending on the type of film and on his knowledge of the institution that pertains.15 We know how crucial the opening and end credits can be in shaping our expectations and understanding of a film, but what happens in between? The author is absent, outside of the text, even if autobiographical screenings are often introduced by the filmmaker and followed by a Q&A, allowing us to get to know the filmmaker not only through the mediation of the screen but also in flesh and blood. However, I would argue that the presence of the filmmaker in flesh and blood makes us more aware of the likeness and the discrepancies between the real author and her or his screen avatar.

Now, what can be said about the plenitude of images and sounds that fill in during the screening for the bodily absence of the ‘real’ author? Some answers can be found in Vivian Sobchack’s semiotic phenomenology of film experience. Based on the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack conceives the film as a direct as well as a mediated experience,

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15 ‘Boredom will be the sanction pronounced by someone going to see a documentary in the frame of mind of someone going to see a fiction film. Inversely, someone going to see a fiction film in the frame of mind of the reader-actant of a documentary would probably be considered “insane”, for he would be accused of confusing different levels of reality. It can be seen that the sanction may apply to the film itself, if its treatment of the material is unacceptable to the institution within which it is meant to operate, or the reader-actant, if he infringes the institutional determinations that are imposed on him.’ Roger Odin, ‘For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film’, trans. by Claudine Tourniaire, in *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind*, ed. by Warren Buckland (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), 213-26 (p. 220).
in terms of an ‘embodied language’ or a shared ‘expression of experience by experience’.\textsuperscript{16} She considers film experience as a form of communication based on bodily perception, in which the film represents, however, more than just a visible object, since, according to Sobchack, watching a film thus implies that one will ‘perceive a world both within the immediate experience of an “other” and without it, as [an] immediate experience mediated by an “other”’.\textsuperscript{17}

For Sobchack, as for Metz, the film is simultaneously a representation of a world that transcends the filmmaker, since the film constitutes and locates in itself its origin and address, that is, ‘its own perceptual and expressive experience of being and becoming’.\textsuperscript{18} But, in contrast to Metz, Sobchack emphasizes not only the film performance but also the performance of the spectator. A major part of her work lies precisely in showing how the film experience is based on the parallelism between the act of perception and expression experienced by the filmmaker, and by the spectator. Metz’s purpose is to free the theory of enunciation for the filmic – or for all monodirectional, unchangeable discourses – from its anthropomorphic conception; Sobchack takes it, so to speak, from the other side. She tackles the problem of demonstrating that, in terms of its perceptive and expressive performance, the film acts not only as ‘a visible and viewed object’ but like a ‘viewing subject’ without being a ‘human subject’.\textsuperscript{19}

Sobchack’s conception of the viewing experience as a shared act of vision is particularly relevant to the autobiographical film. ‘There are always two embodied acts of vision at work in the theater’, she writes,

\begin{quote}
 two embodied views constituting the intelligibility and significance of the film experience. The film’s vision and my own do not conflate, but meet in the sharing of a world and constitute an experience that is not only intrasubjectively dialectical, but also intersubjectively dialogical. Although there are moments in which our views may become congruent in the convergence of our interest (never of our situation), there are also moments in which our views conflict; our values, interests, prospects, and projects differ.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 10-11 (emphasis in original).
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 22.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 24.
Mekas's Lyrical Glimpses

The most obvious example of an invitation to a shared vision can be found in Jonas Mekas's fleeting cinematographic glimpses, which also refute Bruss's assertion that there is no real cinematic equivalent for autobiography. She argues:

For the autobiographical act must be at once expressive and descriptive; the two are not mutually exclusive in language where truth is acknowledged to be a construction (an assertion that the speaker makes) rather than a reflection [or unmediated recording]. Thus we do not immediately assume that statements delivered in propria persona must be distorted or vague or unverifiable, whereas in film expressive and descriptive shots seem almost mutually exclusive.21

Alternatively, in Mekas's films there are endless possible choices of moments where the descriptive and the expressive fuse, as, for example: Pola's wedding scene, his Notes on the Circus (USA 1966), and his visit to Brakhage in Walden, also known as Diaries, Notes and Sketches (USA 1969), or the glimpses of Mekas's reunion with his mother in Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania (USA 1972). Mekas's gestural style and his cascades of evanescent images reflect his state of mind and emotions more than being a documentation of events. Following Merleau-Ponty and Sobchack's formulation, they offer an expression of his experience by experience. When Mekas is filming Pola's wedding, his way of shooting attests to his exalted feelings rather than to an aim to document the wedding (especially compared to traditional home movie recordings). The act of filming is the subject matter of this sequence as much as Pola's wedding is.

Mekas himself has explained the difference between a written and a filmed diary in his lecture on Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania:

21 Bruss, 'Eye for I', p. 306. Bruss bases her demonstration on autobiographically inspired feature films like Truffaut's The 400 Blows (F 1959) or Fellini's 8½ (I/F 1963), in which the protagonist is not embodied by the filmmaker himself. Although she also mentions Kenneth Anger's Fireworks (USA 1947), Jean Cocteau's Testament of Orpheus (F 1960), and Joyce at 34 (USA 1972) by Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill, these films lack, in her opinion, ‘the value of identity’. The first two films are further deemed not to have provided ‘a faithful reflection or representation of the person [of the filmmaker]’ (p. 470). In the case of Joyce at 34, Bruss does not acknowledge that Joyce Chopra, the film's protagonist – admittedly filmed by the other co-filmmaker – also authored the film. For Bruss, films are a priori a collective work, the result of the work of a team in front of and behind the camera, which leads her to conclude ‘that there is no real film equivalent to autobiography’ (p. 461).
When you write a diary, for example, you sit down, in the evening, by yourself, and you reflect upon your day, you look back. But in the filming, in keeping a notebook with the camera, the main challenge became how to react with the camera right now, as it’s happening; how to react to it in such a way that the footage would reflect what I feel that very moment. If I choose to film a certain detail, as I go through my life, there must be good reasons why I single out this specific detail from thousands of other details.22

In the description of Walden in the Filmmaker’s Cooperative Catalog, Mekas further specifies the particular stance he adopted when shooting his diary:

To keep a film (camera) diary, is to react (with your camera) immediately, now, this instant: either you get it now, or you don’t get it at all. To go back and shoot it later, it would mean restaging, be it events or feelings. To get it now, as it happens, demands the total mastery of one’s tools (in this case, Bolex): it has to register the reality to which I react and also it has to register my state of feeling (and all the memories) as I react. Which also means, that I had to do all the structuring (editing) right there, during the shooting, in the camera. All footage that you’ll see in the Diaries is exactly as it came out from the camera: there was no way of achieving it in the editing room without destroying its form and content.23

A few years earlier, while shooting The Brig (USA 1964), Mekas had already experienced this creation with one’s total body as tactile interaction in cinema, and considered this direct relationship between artist, tools, and materials as an essential difference between the New American Cinema and traditional cinema:

[T]he camera has become the extension of the artist’s fingers, and the lens his third eye. [...] The camera movements are reflections of the body movements; the body movements are reflections of the emotional and thought movements – which, in their turn, are caused by what came in through the eye. A circle between the artist’s eye and the camera eye is established.24

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Before adopting these bodily expressions of perception as means of expression, Mekas had encountered them as a spectator, and had given a wonderful account of this viewing experience in his review of a retrospective of Marie Menken’s films that took place in 1961 in New York.

The work of Marie Menken is the opposite of prose [...] film. [...] She transposes reality into poetry. [...] Menken sings. Her lens is focused on the physical world, but she sees it through a poetic temperament and with an intensified sensitivity. She catches the bits and fragments of the world around her and organizes them into aesthetic unities which communicate to us. [...] Does Menken transpose reality? Or condense it? Or does she, simply, go direct to the essence of it? Isn’t poetry more realistic than any realism? The realist sees only the front of a building, the outlines, a street, a tree. Menken sees in them the motion of time and eye. She sees the motions of heart in a tree. She sees through them and beyond them. She retains a visual memory of all that she sees. She re-creates moments of observation, of meditation, reflection, wonderment. A rain that she sees, a tender rain, becomes the memory of all rains she ever saw; a garden that she sees becomes a memory of all gardens, all color, all perfume, all midsummer and sun.

What is poetry? An exalted experience? An emotion that dances? A spearhead into the heart of man? We are invited to a communion, we break our wills, we dissolve ourselves into the flow of her images, we experience admittance into the sanctuary of Menken’s soul. We sit in silence and we take part in her secret thoughts, admirations, ecstasies, and we become more beautiful ourselves.25

Doesn’t Mekas’s praise of Marie Menken’s film poetry read like a description of his own work to come? And doesn’t his vivid depiction of his viewing experience of Menken’s film convert into words what we might like to say about our viewing experience of lyrical moments in Mekas’s films, when we are invited to share his vision and feelings by dissolving ourselves into the flow of his images; in short, to experience his experience through the expression of his experience?

These instants of gestural subjectivity are traces of the act of production that settle, even more literally than Bruss imagined, her criterion of the

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‘act-value’; in other words, autobiography has to be a personal performance. Mekas’s way of filming exemplifies Bruss’s assertion of the necessary inscription of ‘the agent responsible for that action and how it is performed’.

The ‘last I’ is irremediably absent, but the ‘I shooting’ is pervasively present. It is indeed a paradoxical figure of origin, but does it create a feeling of absence that is even more absent, as Metz argues, because the film is an unchangeable discourse that excludes a response? Metz, however, is writing about narrative cinema and does not expand his theory to non-fiction films. Metz makes only some marginal remarks about experimental or documentary films and is not concerned with autobiographical cinema or with films that have come to be known as ‘lyrical’.

In his concluding chapter, Metz discusses at length the possible distinction between narration and enunciation. From his point of view, narration is only a technical term referring to the enunciation in a narrative text and is a term that came into being because of the importance of narratives in our culture. Still, in a short paragraph, he concedes the existence of two cases where the enunciation can be distinguished from narration or narrative enunciation: the first is the large corpus of non-narrative texts, and the second is ‘written or spoken narratives where one could distinguish, although uneasily, the narrative mechanisms which result from the idiom from those which would be independent from it’.

Metz ends his discussion by acknowledging the importance of Käte Hamburger’s phenomenological narrative theory. Contrary to Hamburger, however, Metz does not engage with the lyrical genre, to which Hamburger devotes a whole chapter, because it differs both from narrative fiction and from non-literary usage of language. In her phenomenological approach, the use of language in written narrative fiction is distinct from everyday language because for her, just as for Metz, one cannot attribute what is narrated ‘to

27 P. Adams Sitney coined the term ‘lyrical film’ by referring initially nearly exclusively to works by Stan Brakhage: ‘The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision. In the lyrical form there is no longer a hero, instead, the screen is filled with movement, and that movement, both of the camera and the editing, reverberates with the idea of a man looking.’ P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film. The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2002), p. 160.
29 Metz strongly agrees with Hamburger’s theory, although he underlines that she is concerned with de-anthropomorphising the subjects of fiction, and, unlike him, the subjects of enunciation; see *L’énonciation*, p. 196.
a real I-Origo, but to fictive I-Origines’. 30 But lyrical poetry differs from narrative fiction because ‘the lyrical I can be encountered only as a real and never as a fictive subject’. 31 On the one side, the subject is real (as in non-literary usage of language); on the other, lyrical statements do not refer to reality, as does everyday usage of language. For Hamburger, the lyrical statement incorporates its object into the statement; it ‘does not render the object of experience, but the experience of the object, as the content of its statement’, 32 regardless of whether or not it is a first-person poem or whether the experience is an actual or an imaginary one. The experience depicted in a poem cannot be subjected to verification, since it is not oriented to reality, nor does it function in a context of reality. We are dealing exclusively with the expression of the experience of the ‘stating I’. As Hamburger emphasizes,

we no longer can, no longer may, ascertain whether the statement’s content is true or false, objectively real or unreal – we are dealing only with subjective truth and reality, with the experience-field [Erlebnisfeld] of the stating I itself. […] We are dealing only with that reality which the lyric I signifies as being its, that subjective, existential reality which cannot be compared with any objective reality which might form the semantic nucleus of its statement. 33

It is important to note that Hamburger regards this identity only as a logical identity, and that she emphasizes the fact that the ‘poem presents the experience-field of the lyric I in the very variability and indeterminability of its significance’, and that ‘the respective difference or identity between the lyric I and the empirical I of the poet also belongs to this character of indeterminability’. 34 This indeterminability of the identity or non-identity of the ‘lyrical I’ with the ‘empirical I’ of the poet itself serves as evidence of the character of the lyric poem as reality statement. Hamburger also points out that lyrical inserts can be integrated into an epic fictional work (and vice versa).

The indexical nature of (analog) cinema complicates the status of filmic lyrical inserts. On the one hand, there is no doubt about the factual nature of the events that Mekas has captured with his Bolex camera. Pola’s wedding or

30 Hamburger, The Logic of Literature, p. 73.
31 Ibid., p. 278.
32 Ibid., pp. 275-76.
34 Ibid., p. 284 (emphasis in original).
Mekas’s reunion with his mother in Lithuania has taken place. The veracity of the facts related can be verified by comparison with other documents that describe the same events (thus fulfilling Bruss’s ‘truth-value’ or Lejeune’s ‘referential pact’). On the other hand, the expression of his experience prevails over the documentation of the events.

The question of the logical identity and the points of convergence and divergence between the ‘lyrical I’ and the ‘empirical I’ is not only crucial with respect to the lyric but also to autobiography. Although Hamburger does deal with first-person narrative as a special or mixed form, the first-person narratives she writes about are autobiographically inspired novels, and, even if she alludes several times to genuine autobiography, she never addresses it as such.\(^3^5\) Psychoanalysis and (post)structuralism should have dissuaded us from a reductionist conception of the human subject. Still, one cannot stress enough that the identity does not necessarily mean a centred, unified entity but rather a fragmentary, multiple, decentred self.

**Ross McElwee’s Retrophrenic Voice**

The presence of the autobiographical I can be further refracted by the way the filmmaker composes and positions the voice-over. There are very few autobiographical films that do not include a voice-over commentary. Speech is necessary as it returns *in fine* with the commentary to flesh out context and to express feelings or reflections, or to digress on any subject present or absent in the image. In this respect, the autobiographical filmmaker resembles the autobiographical writer in terms that Dominique Noguez describes as ‘egography, discourse about oneself rather than autobiography in the strict sense, because the latter are necessarily conveyed by an account’ in the form of a voice-over commentary that adds ‘thus a “rewriting” to the “writing” in images’.\(^3^6\)

The voice-over narration presents strong affinities with the written autobiography. However, the autobiographical filmmaker also has to ‘write’ in images, as it were. Thus, he or she shapes the assemblage between the images and the words as well as between shots. One could even say that the art of filmic autobiographical filmmaking consists in conjugating images with speech, in finding a tone for this reflexive redundancy while fashioning

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\(^3^5\) Ibid., pp. 311-41.

the break between the visible and the spoken. The voice-over tethers the image – it can precede the image, it can follow it, or even refer to it laterally, as André Bazin wrote in his account of Chris Marker’s *Letter from Siberia* (F 1958), where he salutes the birth of a new filmic genre, the film essay, and the creation of a new form of montage that Bazin proposes to name ‘horizontal montage’ or ‘from ear to eye’.

This ‘horizontal montage’ reverses the relation between the visual and the auditory: speech does not dictate the image, nor does it subject itself to the image; rather, it forges a new form of audio-visual perception.

Ross McElwee is another partisan of the ‘horizontal montage’ ‘from ear to eye’, thus creating a subtle interlacing of speech and image. I would like to comment on two striking aspects of the composition of McElwee’s voice-over commentaries, which he has used since *Sherman’s March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South During an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation* (USA 1985): his use of the present tense and his manner of dating or using temporal deixis. The editing of his films entails marathon undertakings comprising various creative decisions: identifying themes in his rushes, and lines of forces for a potential narration; unleashing structures from their diaristic backbone in order to relate them to the essay form; selecting material from older films and home movies; and composing and placing the commentary.

Whereas McElwee writes and records the commentary during the editing, the voice-over does not comment on the images in the past tense but rather in the present tense. This present, moreover, is not that of the time of editing, when he rediscovers the images and seeks to capture his reaction to viewing the footage, but rather a ‘past-present’, as he gives the impression of commenting on the images at the very moment of shooting. More shrewdly, the manner of dating (or using temporal deixis) creates an effect of coexistence, as if he is commenting on the images for viewers during the projection of the film in a movie theatre. There are no dates

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38 This takes long periods of work: the montage of *Sherman’s March* (USA 1985) began two years after the filming and took McElwee four years, and *Bright Leaves* (USA 2004) was shot over four years and the editing was in progress for five years, of which three paralleled the filming. My analysis of McElwee’s voice-over commentary here draws on my essay ‘Ross McElwee’s Voice’ where I also discuss McElwee’s radical transformation of observational cinema through the introduction of his voice-over commentary in the first person. Dominique Bluher, ‘Ross McElwee’s Voice / La voz de Ross McElwee’, in *Landscape of the Self: The Cinema of Ross McElwee / Paisajes yo: El Cine de Ross McElwee*, ed. by Efrén Cuevas and others (Madrid: Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, 2007), pp. 135-49.
given, no explicit indication of the year, month, or days, but there are deictic expressions such as ‘two years ago’, ‘the next day’, ‘after a few months’, or ‘this morning’, which relate the content not to a given chronological time but to a point relative to the time of the specific speech act.

McElwee’s spoken text positions the situations in relation to the present of shooting, just as it merges them into the present of what is heard during the projection. In this manner, three presents superimpose themselves one on top of the other: the past-present (images), the present-present (speech utterance), and the future-present (projection); or, from another perspective, two pasts (the shooting and the recording of voice-over) actualize themselves in each new projection. This complex temporal expression evokes Saint Augustine’s conception of time experienced as a simultaneous coexistence of three times – a present of the past, a present of the present, and a present of the future – rather than as a succession of past, present, and future (book XI of his Conessions39). McElwee himself has marvelously described this divide in a text for Trafic: ‘A kind of schizophrenia sets in as you edit – or perhaps “retrophrenia” would be a better word – but at any rate, an odd sense of looking back from one present tense to what seems to be another very vivid present tense – the world as apprehended by the filmmaker a few years earlier.40 In Bright Leaves (USA 2004), he also acknowledges the presence of the future when he says, ‘I can almost feel him [his son Adrian], looking back at me from some distant point in the future.’ McElwee considers his son as future spectator who will see his films, but we can also consider this potential spectator as a stand-in for all future spectators.

What does this tell us about personal enunciation? Time is always a decisive issue in autobiography and diaries. One can even base the distinction between genres of personal discourses on the different temporal structures they adopt. Thus, the traditional autobiography, understood as retrospective narrative focusing on the story of the author’s life, is characterized by a significant gap between the events recalled – let’s say childhood – and the time, many years after, in which the author is writing his memoir. In contrast, the written diary, where the daily entries are usually put down on paper the same day, shortly after the events, creates a small but nevertheless significant interval between the act of writing and the events. Now consider

cinema. In contrast with the written diary, there is no gap between events and the filming of the events; it is all about presentness – presentness of the event, presentness of the filmmaker while capturing it, and presentness of these former presents during the projection.

McElwee’s ‘retrophrenic present’ is not only created by the present tense of the commentary but also by his artful composition of images and commentary. Of course, there are more conventional passages where the voice-over introduces the situation and the characters. At other moments, an ingenious alliance emerges between the images and the voice-over. One example is a hilarious scene toward the end of *Bright Leaves*. McElwee (as character) is chased by a yelping dog, who ruins a shot, while he (as narrator) says in the voice-over that he would have liked to have pensively traversed a garden strewn with pumpkins and plaster angels. This scene follows a visit to Marian Foster Fitz-Simons, the widow of Foster Fitz-Simons, the author of the novel *Bright Leaf* (1948), which Michael Curtiz brought to the screen in 1950, featuring Gary Cooper in the role of the rich owner of a tobacco plantation who is ruined by a rival. McElwee (as character) imagined this to be the tragic history of his own great-grandfather, who was once an important producer of cigarettes and who lost everything to the powerful Duke family. Marian Foster Fitz-Simons explains to him that the book is not based on his great-grandfather or on any other specific tobacco planter in the region. Curtiz’s film, then, cannot be the ‘Hollywood home movie’ about his great-grandfather that the character McElwee had hoped for. The narrator McElwee follows this disappointing meeting with the sequence where he traverses the garden full of pumpkins and decorative plaster objects. To those images, which would be rather banal and trivial in themselves, he joins a deadpan commentary added during the final editing, after he knew the outcome of his inquiry, which supplies a comic and reflexive perspective on the situation; the images simply show McElwee being chased by a small dog trying to snatch his pant leg. Moreover, the dog ‘obliges’ him to interrupt his reflections and wait until the second take to continue the course of his thoughts:

How can this be? I suddenly find myself adrift, dogged by doubts as to my family’s cinematic legacy, dogged, in fact, by a dog. This small hound, which came out of nowhere, has ruined the shot. Take two: As I was saying, I suddenly find myself adrift. Is it possible that my great grandfather’s story didn’t even stay alive down here for the thirty years until *Bright Leaf* was written? It’s almost as if he’s been ‘disappeared’ – exiled from local history. I think I need to do a little more research.
The spectator, distracted, laughs more at the situation than from surprise at McElwee’s persona’s supposed naiveté. Thanks to the commentary, the dog literally becomes the visual expression of the doubts that assail him. It is not certain and not at all necessary that this scene took place just after the filmmaker’s meeting with Marian Foster Fitz-Simons. Given that the film takes the form of an essay, the unfolding of events does not necessarily correspond to the temporality of the filmic organization. McElwee-as-narrator profits from our inclination, as Roland Barthes writes, to read the consecutive as the consequential.41 In my next example, the divide and liaison between pastness and presentness are played out not only verbally but through the mise-en-scène.

**Varda’s Installations and (Re)enactments in *Les plages d’Agnès***

In her last feature film, *Les plages d’Agnès* (F 2008), Varda recounts her amazing life story: her origins and childhood, her life as a woman, photographer, filmmaker, video artist, mother and grandmother, and as a joyous and grieving wife. Varda opens *Les plages d’Agnès* by taking up the part of an actor ‘playing the role of a little old lady, pleasantly plump and talkative, telling her life story’. These are Varda’s first words, heard while we see her walking backwards on the beach. Thus, Varda literally performs the retrospective stance characteristic of the autobiography: she is not only looking back, she is stepping backwards, and throughout the film Varda will reiterate this backward move on the different beaches that have marked her life and which will divide the film like chapters. By the same token, she establishes the autobiographical pact by identifying herself as the protagonist, narrator, and author of her film.

*Les plages d’Agnès* is constructed from her stories of the past, a recollection of memories, of reveries or something imaginary, as Varda says in *Les plages d’Agnès*. But beyond narrating episodes of her fascinating life, the way Varda stages and (re)enacts them is a means to represent the emotional significance of these happy or difficult periods as Varda remembers them for us ‘today’, or, more precisely, when she was making her film. These are simple but ingenious, reflected and reflexive cinematic representations of the past as well as of Varda’s present, which, furthermore, render perceptible the discrepancies and the concurrences between the ‘I’ (the narrator Varda, creator of *Les plages d’Agnès*) and the ‘me’s’ (the different and multifarious former ‘Agnès’ that Varda portrays).

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In his fine comment on *Les plages d’Agnès*, Raymond Bellour notes the importance of the installations in her film, such that one could even consider the film as a series of installations. He also discerns that the underlying principle of the film consists of ‘the mise-en-scène as installation’ and ‘the installation as mise-en-scène’, and reminds us that certain earlier films already contained ‘virtual elements of pre-installation’. Each episode is interspersed with several of these installations / mises-en-scène. Some are simple and imaginative visualizations, as, for example, when Varda performs, through a cinematic transposition, Agnès’ (second) ‘birth’ or ‘conception’. While Varda’s voice-over recounts how she, as a young adult, had her birthname ‘Arlette’ (given because she was conceived in city of Arles) officially changed to ‘Agnès’, we see her writing her given name, Arlette, with a stick in the sand and letting it be washed away by the waves. Some of these installations / mises-en-scène are hilariously funny, like the skits about the coal-fired stove, or about the difficulties encountered parking her first car in the courtyard of her house in the rue Daguerre. Even if these must have been difficult times, the way that Varda remembers them for us, their mise-en-scène, and their enactments underscore their present humorous anecdotal significance over the harshness of those days. There are also moments that she would prefer not to evoke, like her second sojourn in Los Angeles. When it is time to relate it, Varda walks backward on a pier in Santa Monica, surrounded by skateboarders, who are a kind of embodiment of the memories, which as she says, ‘swarm around [her] like confused flies’. She admits that she hesitates to remember all of this past time. In the next shot, we see her in front of a giant mural of whales, and Varda seems to execute some Tai Chi-like movement backwards, her palms facing outward and pushing away an invisible wall. This wall becomes, through a split screen, a shot of a group practicing Tai Chi, which she had filmed in 1980 for her documentary *Murmurs* (about murals in the Los Angeles area). We see Varda on the left side in the present, on the right in the past.

René Magritte’s painting *Les amants* (1928) serves as a starting point for a vivid image of her and Demy’s sensual togetherness and carnal love. The shot starts with a close-up of a man and a woman pressed together

in a fond gesture, the two heads covered by some kind of cloth, just as in Magritte’s painting. But when the camera tracks backward, it unveils two lovers who are not, as suggested in the painting, clothed but naked. Furthermore, the man has quite an impressive erection. ‘We were flesh and blood beings. Lovers, like Magritte’s’, comments Varda, laconically. The installation sequence towards the end of the film, when Varda has to evoke Demy’s death, ends with an enactment of George Segal’s installation *Alice Listening to Her Poetry and Music* (1970). Linked together through superimpositions of breaking waves, the first two shots are close-ups of stumps and branches of dead trees; the other two show Varda, the first in a close-up facing the camera, against a darkish brick wall, wearing a white veil that reflects the waves. She turns away, and the next shot shows her sitting at a small metal table, covered from head to toe in a white outfit. The waves on her body fade slowly away, while Varda reaches out to turn on an old-fashioned radio on the table. Filled with strangeness and poetry, this sequence is shrouded in grief. No words – only silence – can evoke the unspeakable loss, this void of pain filled with silenced breaking waves and soothed by Bach’s cantata *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* (*Heart and Mouth and Deed and Life*).

In *Les plages d’Agnès*, Varda plays out the inevitable copresence of Varda-as-protagonist and Varda-the-narrator. This occurs from the very first (re) enactment of the film in which Varda stages a childhood scene on the Belgian beach. It starts with Varda on the beach, displaying a couple of photographs in the sand, showing her and her siblings at the beach. The photographs show two little girls whom Varda would like to bring back to life. Thanks to the magic of an ellipsis, the next shot shows us two little girls, dressed just as in the photographs, playing ‘market’ with shells and artificial flowers. Cinema has this power to pass in a flash from the present to the past and to give a true-to-life representation of past events; countless flashbacks operate in this manner. The scene could have been just an illustration, a visualization of the past, if Varda hadn’t entered the scenery she had created, interacting with the girls in front of the camera, musing about the significance of her recreation: ‘I don’t know what it means to recreate a scene like this. Do we relive the moment? For me, it’s cinema, it’s a game.’

This sequence, all at once, reminds me of, and stands in revealing contrast with, a sequence in Ingmar Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries* (SWE 1957). Isak Borg (Victor Sjöström) slips into a dream-like state that transports him into the past, where he witnesses a painful moment in his young manhood when his brother is seducing his cousin Sara, to whom Isak is secretly engaged. Like Varda, the character Isak Borg ‘creates’ a true-to-life representation of
the past, and, like Varda, Isak Borg is present in the scene from the past. But, in contrast to Varda, he is condemned to be a helpless observer. He can’t be seen by the other characters, nor can he intervene. In contrast, Varda is anything but powerless; on the contrary, she affirms herself as simultaneously the producer and the protagonist of her autofictional account. In her film, the past does not come to her as an immutable appearance but rather has been created by Varda for the purpose of the film. This is all the more true since, according to Varda, her childhood has no particular importance to her. Thus, the laying bare of the mise-en-scène is not a simple demystification of the production process but a representation of the mediation of the past by the act of remembering.

But this is a representation of the way in which the act of remembering mediates the events that we usually consider as immutable. Just as Sigmund Freud pointed out at the end of his seminal text on ‘Screen Memories’ that memories are not stored at the time when the events are taking place; they are not retrieved but are formed when we recall them.43

There are some recollections of her adolescence in a similar vein to the aforementioned childhood scene on the Belgian beach. During the account of moments when her family lived on a stationary sailboat in the harbour of the Mediterranean port Sète, where they relocated during World War II, Varda appears and comments on the scene, while her legs dangle from the quay. Later in the film, when Agnès studies at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris, Varda crosses the back of the shot in the sailboat, while her younger incarnation (played by Anne-Laure Manceau, who, with bowl haircut and pointy nose, looks very much like the young Varda in the photographs from the period) reads on the bank of the Seine.

In these moments, the logically distinct roles of author, narrator, and protagonist are all at once conjoined to establish the autobiographical pact and sufficiently disjointed for one to perceive the discrepancies between the narrator Varda and the former and different ‘Agnès’ that the author Varda portrays in her film. The film is folding, as Metz describes enunciation,

43 ‘It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all from our childhood: memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, emerge; they were formed at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves.’ Sigmund Freud, ‘Screen Memories’, in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1962), III, 303-322 (p. 322).
giving indications concerning the production process, or speaking ‘to us of this text as an act’. As metadiscursive commentaries, these folds reveal the superposition of Varda-the-protagonist, Varda-the-narrator, and Varda-the-producer of the autobiographical account, as well as the fact that these ‘I’s’ on and off screen do not match up. The author, ‘the last I’, is always outside of the text and can never be caught within it. Not only do these layerings create, as Metz says, a ‘feeling of a site of absence, paradoxical figures of origin, even more “absent” in unchangeable discourses that exclude a response’, this site is also, if one may say, a rather crowded absence.

It took centuries and countless philosophical, theological, and juridical debates to form our Western notion of the human being as an autonomous, responsible, and conscious individual, before psychoanalysis and (post) structuralism, as well as modern philosophers and sociologists, dismantled this conception. Lejeune's semio-pragmatic conception of identity depends on the notion of the human being as a unity and of the proper name as the manifestation of this unity. His paratextual definition of autobiography does not take into account the fact, stressed by sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu, that in our societies, the proper name functions essentially as an authentication for legal purposes. And, in order for the name to serve as such, one has to disregard the biological and social changes that the individual undergoes through his life. One could imagine that if we had a different concept of the self, like those of certain tribes described by Marcel Mauss in ‘A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; the Notion of Self’, where ‘every stage of life is named, personified by a fresh name, a fresh title, whether as a child, an adolescent or an adult’, we might not have to resort to our sometimes convoluted and still ambiguous circumlocutions in order to refer to the different stages depicted and involved in creating an autobiographical account; for example, McElwee on screen (the protagonist) versus McElwee commenting on the images (the narrator) during the editing process, or Varda-child on the beach in Belgium (played by a young girl) compared with Varda-the-filmmaker who

is staging the scene in the film, and Varda, the extratextual or ‘real’ author of *Les plages d’Agnès*. They all bear the same name, but all the zest lies in the vertiginous layering of, and gaps between, the presented and presenting selves, the narrated and enunciative selves. Henri Michaux has given a superb résumé of these multiple and nevertheless omnipresent ‘I’s’ in his afterword to *Plume* (1938): ‘There is not one self. There are not ten selves. There is no self. ME is only a position in equilibrium. (One among a thousand others, continually possible and always at the ready.) An average of “me’s,” a movement in the crowd. In the name of many, I sign this book.’

Traditional autobiographies are usually subjected to a teleological conception of a life, leading to a conflation of the chronological and the logical, and these sorts of accounts become a way to distill an identity, a core if not a substance, with a certain consistency and permanency, despite the changes that this entity undergoes during her or his life. Paul Ricœur has summed up this paradoxical dilemma as ‘the possibility of conceiving of change as happening to something which does not change. […] The entire problematic of personal identity will revolve around this search for a relational invariant, giving it the strong signification of permanence in time.’ An account or a narrative is a privileged means to discover such an identity, although Ricœur underlines an inherent double bind, since the narrative is also, in return, constructing the identity: ‘The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character.’

*Les plages d’Agnès* does not present Varda’s life story as a narrative that overcomes the discontinuities between the portrayed

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49 As Lejeune notes laconically: ‘Nine of ten autobiographies inevitably begin at the moment of birth and will then follow what is called “chronological ‘order’”; Lejeune, ‘The Order of Narrative in Sartre’s *Les mots*,’ in *On Autobiography*, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 70-107 (p. 70). Bourdieu makes a similar observation: ‘As in Maupassant’s title *Une vie (A Life)*, a life is inseparably the sum of the events of an individual existence seen as a history and the narrative of that history. That is precisely what common sense, or everyday language, tells us: life is like a path, a road, a track […] Life can also be seen as a progression, that is, a way that one is clearing and has yet to clear, a trip, a trajectory, a *cursus*, a passage, a voyage, a directed journey, a unidirectional and linear move (“mobility”), consisting of a beginning (“entering into life”), various stages, and an end, understood both as a termination and as a goal […]’ Bourdieu, ‘The Biographical Illusion’, p. 297.


51 Ibid., pp. 147-48.
selves or closes the divides between narrated and the narrating selves; her mise-en-scène not only brings alive memorable moments of her life but discloses simultaneously the significance that these periods possessed at the point in time when she embarked on the making of Les plages d'Agnès.

One can content oneself with describing this co-presence of the different narrated and narrating selves by stressing the impersonal and non-anthropomorphic mechanism of these folds as metadiscursive commentaries and reflections on the act of production. One can also adopt a postmodern position that gives up an integrative perspective on the self in favour of a pluralistic self. In that case, the presence of multiple disjointed selves becomes an expression of the unattainable unity, of the ultimate absence of a 'last I'. By the same token, this viewpoint undermines the emphasis scholars have placed on the conception of the logical identity between author, narrator, and protagonist, which defines the autobiographical pact. This logical identity thus provides the backdrop for the perception and collation of the concordances and the discrepancies between the depicted and the depicting selves as they unfold horizontally (succession) and vertically (layering).

The complexity of the cinematic production process, which involves several stages separated in time – shooting, editing, post-synchronization – offers creative potential for extending the field of expression of the filmmaker's experience, which will be experienced simultaneously by the spectator during the projection. Mekas, McElwee, and Varda all embrace and shape this potential in different ways. In Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania, Mekas captures the feelings of exhilaration that take hold of him on his way back to Semeniskia to see his mother after twenty-five years of separation. Even if Mekas's glimpses express, first and foremost, his emotions at the very moment of shooting, they have been subtly heightened by the joyful and melancholic folk song and the crescendoing numbered intertitles, joined after the fact in postproduction. McElwee includes the various production steps in the creation of a 'retrophrenic present'. The composition and positioning of the commentary – as well as the editing – are as much a part of this Augustinian presentness as the footage is. They are all enfolded into the expression of the expressive self and the shaping of our perception of this expressive self. But it must be noted that neither the naiveté of McElwee’s screen persona nor the seemingly narrow lens of

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52 Inherent to a postmodern approach is also a relativization of the truth-value, which accords to the expression of subjective truth and the author's self-perception and representation as much importance as to the actual factuality of the events.
McElwee’s family history prevent McElwee (the author) from addressing the medical, social, historical, political, economic, or cultural issues of the American South. In contrast to McElwee’s ‘retrophenic present’, where the production steps converge towards an all-embracing experience of presentness, Varda’s mise-en-scène plays out the interval between the narrating and the depicted selves. Where McElwee’s treatment of the different instances to express ‘the experience-field [Erlebnisfeld] of the stating I itself’ leads to the impression of a superimposed presence, which is especially evident when his voice-over commentary adopts the form of an inner monologue, Varda’s disunions extend the experience-field of the ‘stating I’ (and, in consequence, the spectator’s field of experience), as, in particular, when Varda’s distinct selves are literally co-present in the same image.

Not only is the last I always outside of the text, as Metz asserts, it is also the case that the textual representations of ‘the I’ do not lead to one ultimate self. However, I will never know to what extent Metz would agree that, in the case of autobiographical films, the traces left by the stating I are not metadiscursive indicators of an impersonal enunciation. Surely, they are ‘speaking to us of this text as an act’, commenting and reflecting upon the film, or rather upon the different stages of the production of the film. But they are not only speaking of the film as an act, they also give expression to various selves of the filmmaker, even though these selves come into existence only through the process of the filmmaking and are only experienced by the viewer during the projection. Metz’s theory of enunciation deepens our understanding of complex textual figurations of the forever-absent and unattainable I, even or especially in autobiographical films, since the indexical inscriptions of the filmmaker bear the risk of being considered as representations of ‘the I’. Still, in autobiographical films, these figurations are also instances of presentification (in the phenomenological sense of ‘Vergegenwärtigung’) of the experiencing I, that is to say, they are the mediated expressions of the experience of a real and singular subject at particular times.

About the author

Dominique Bluher is Lecturer and Director of M.A. Studies in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago. After

53 Hamburger, The Logic of Literature, p. 277.
54 Metz, L’énonciation, p. 20 and 189.
studying in Berlin, she received her PhD in film studies from the University of Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle). She was co-editor of the journal *Iris* from 1992 to 2002. Subsequently, she was Lecturer in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University; Maître de conférences at the Université Rennes 2; Visiting Professor at Brown University, Wellesley College, and Freie Universität Berlin; and Senior Fellow at the IKKM (Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie) in Weimar. Her writings on French film theory, French cinema, and autobiographical films have appeared in many books and journals. She co-edited two anthologies on French non-fiction short films of the 1950s and 1960s and is currently working on two books related to autobiography and cinema.