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## Impersonal enunciation, or the place of film

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Metz, Christian. *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film*, translated by Cormac Deane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

This volume in Columbia University Press's 'Film and Culture' series is an English translation of a collection of essays originally published together in Paris in 1991, prior to Christian Metz's death in 1993. The first English language publication of the full text of a major work by Metz *should* be widely regarded as a major event in Anglophone film theory. Thirty years ago and earlier this conditional qualification would have been entirely unnecessary: any 'new' book by Metz would have been the immediate subject of discussion and debate. Today, however, Metz is conspicuously out of intellectual fashion in academic film studies. Famous for its application of ideas from structural linguistic and allied semiotic frameworks to cinema, Metz's film theory appears to sit uneasily at the current table of more empirical, naturalistic and cognitive research programmes, on the one hand, and phenomenological and other perception-, body-, and affect-based paradigms (of which Metz was a perceptive critic *avant la lettre*), on the other. Irrespective of the ebb and flow of intellectual trends, the scholarly breadth, depth and seriousness that Metz's work represents and his willingness to engage head-on with many of the most fundamental issues concerning cinema as a both medium of communication *and* an art, have perennial interest and value.

There are thirteen essays in all here, organized as numbered chapters. They are bracketed by a highly useful, critical and historical introduction by the translator, Cormac Deane, and an equally perceptive afterword by Dana Polan, who attended Metz's seminars at the Sorbonne. As both these contributors aptly note, in style and tone this is a somewhat different Metz than the author of such austere, grand system building works as *Film Language* and *Language and Cinema*, in which he aims to establish a semiological framework of analysis for any and all narrative fiction films. Here the author writes in a relatively less formal manner, well suited to his taking on a more empirical, historical and programmatic approach to his main subject. Namely, the application of the textual pragmatic concept of enunciation to cinema. Also departing from his earlier writing is the sheer number of filmic and televisual examples cited (no less than seventy-five), the presence of which evidences the French theorist's "vast" and "eclectic" cinephilia noted by Polan (179), something often not as visible in Metz's other work, if always present between the lines.

What remains constant, however, is that the central thread of the essays and Metz's theoretical jumping-off point – enunciation – is a major concept in theoretical linguistics in the Saussurean, structuralist tradition (although not exclusive to it), as well as continental narratology. In these context it takes the form of a basic distinction between “énonciation” and “énoncé” corresponding to that between the act of speaking versus the utterance (statement) made. Contrary to the views of earlier theorists, Metz's general argument is that it is truly applicable to cinema only in a revised and broader, but at the same time more variegated and nuanced form, which he understands as films drawing attention to their own acts of speaking to viewers. In spite of the fact that it is the film (itself) that is both “speaking” and foregrounding its speech (irrespective of narrative or other content). Thus enunciation is defined in performative terms as a “semiological act by means of which certain parts of a text speak to us of that text as an act” (10). In a taxonomical tour de force, Metz authoritatively catalogs a myriad of ways in which narrative films not only manage to tell stories through images, sounds, and words but how they frequently announce and disclose their communicative activity, in common with some documentaries and moving-image advertising.

In strongly arguing for its topicality amidst the proliferation of novel and hybrid forms of vision-based media as enabled by digital technology, Deane focuses on how Metz's understanding of enunciation as an impersonal textual function has commonalities with cybernetics and anticipates ideas familiar in more recent information theory including network activity and reflexive “feedback loops” independent of psychological subjects (xviii). Together with their historical, diachronic, and non-celluloid/non-cinema exclusive orientation, he sees these writings as a substantial contribution to contemporary discussions of “multimedia, interactivity, networks, [and] media archaeology” (x). Yet they also speak, often more directly and explicitly, to the more traditional topic of (self-) reflexivity in film and moving image art and media. This latter subject is in dire need of an alternative, up-to-date, more comprehensive and systematic (yet non-reductive) conceptual foundation; one which offers more than a small number of continually recycled but often fundamentally unanalyzed ‘Brechtian’ ideas and assumptions, for instance.

Metz begins by acknowledging the criticisms of David Bordwell and other theorists concerning the aptness of structural linguistic ideas in the analysis of film narrative and viewer comprehension. In attempting to answer them and by way of a constructive critique of the (1986) theory of filmic enunciation of his fellow semiotician Francisco Casetti, he frankly admits that the central notion is problematic vis-à-vis cinematic communication. The main shortcomings of a theory of film rooted in linguistic pragmatics as hitherto pursued, on Metz's diagnosis, and hence the principle objects of his critical revision, are (a) the "anthropomorphism" involved in what amounts to the personification of the film work – or aspects of it – treated as an *actual speaker*, or conversational partner; (b) that even the implied use of *personal pronouns* to describe the relations between the film and viewer in the film event is, at best, an analogy—and one which, moreover, finds little support in the actual psychology or phenomenology of viewer experience; and (c) that, insofar as films communicate on the semantic plane, they obviously do not do so with the typical intentions of *language speakers*. In other words, to state facts, make descriptions, issue commands, ask questions, or perform other such primary tasks. Nonetheless, as Metz goes on to suggest, if we are to retain the basic position (which he finds no good reason to abandon) that (1) a film is in some sense and major aspect a semantic *foyer* or "source" – the "place" of the book's subtitle – of not only sensory but cognitive experience, and that (2) the viewer is always its "target," or addressee (all in a culturally and institutionally pre-given, communicative context), it is necessary to go back to the theoretical drawing board and pursue enunciation as the "impersonal" textual and semiotic function (and "act") noted above. To this end, Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the range of fiction film phenomena the author calls the "voice of address," which occurs both within the image and outside of it. These include a character's direct address of the camera/viewer, which like other enunciative devices both "denounce the cinematic illusion...[and are] part of it." But also a voice or voices that are "*juxtadiegetic*, i.e., running closely alongside the plot" (38), or clearly external to the diegesis, the source of which may be a fictional character who, in effect, steps part way out of the story-world to address the audience – or, much more frequently in films, an unidentified voice-over speaker serving as storyteller or simply offering periodic comments on the narrative and/or its subject(s).

Many films have made use of secondary or internal frames (frames-within-frames), borders, screens, and even (the image of) theatrical curtains that repeat and mimic the medium's mode of presentation. In Chapter 5, Metz discusses this phenomenon as a form of enunciation, insofar as it always gestures in the direction of reflexivity. Which, as Metz asserts by way of an important distinction, is one primary category of filmic enunciation together with its "commentative" function. By contrast, film images that contain reflexively functioning mirrors and reflections (the subject of Chapter 6), and those that go further to more explicitly expose and comment on the filmmaking apparatus and/or the events and people of the production process, including through aspects of mise-en-scene and staging, are treated in Chapter 7. Such reflexivity is pushed toward a logical conclusion by various presentations of films within films.

In considering the connection between reflexive enunciation and style (crucial to a more expansive and critical understanding of self-reflexivity mentioned above) Metz rightly observes that a given device present in a film such as the-film-within-the-film directly "signals" something about the 'filmness' of the film by virtue of it being a common signifier of 'filmness.' This is true whether this device appears in Fellini's *Intervista*, for instance, as also marked by the particular "stamp" of his directorial style; in a film by another director with a very different, equally strong and pervasive personal style; or in a film with little recognizable and significant style (127). For this reason, among others, as detailed in Chapter 11, Metz's considers reflexive enunciation (or enunciative reflexivity) to be "codified," "anonymous," "objective," and "impersonal," versus the singular, and often highly "personal" style specific to a "given auteur or school." Whereas style (as defined here) is analogous to a "way of being" and permeates the whole of a film, including being "embodied" within its (narrative) discourse, enunciation is a wholly formal "logical construction." It is a semiotic "operation" reflective of some piece of discourse from outside of it (and distinct from all "content") (127). In other words, *as codified via standard, recurrent use*, the forms and vehicles of filmic enunciation are by definition limited and pre-established, in contrast to "stylistic markers" that are virtually limitless and open-ended in terms of the possibilities of their new invention. This being said, Metz rightly emphasizes the pronounced and often profound "closeness" and "mutual exchange" between style and reflexive enunciation, perceptively tracing the dynamics by which

over time expressive stylistic markers may *become* “markers of enunciation” (e.g. in “postmodern” television commercials and films). And just as significantly, such impersonal and conventional devices may be expressively charged, renewed as it were, when taken up by filmmakers with novel and compelling styles (127). As persuasive as it is, the basic distinction here between enunciation, and acknowledged personal style and artistic expression, highlights the fact that a number of different senses of the “impersonal” nature of the former are seemingly appealed to throughout the book and at times there is some conceptual slippage among these.

The final chapter 13 (also demarcated as Part III, ‘Taking Theoretical Flight’) is a wide-ranging and more abstract discussion of the adversarial positions of numerous other contemporary (circa 1991) authors in narrative and film theory. As against the views of Bordwell and others, who regard it as an implausible imposition of a linguistic phenomenon on the cinematic form, Metz points out that the term “enunciation” is hardly less literary and written text-referencing in its origin than “narration,” an observation also made by Gerard Genette in distinguishing literature, based in signification proper, from the mimetic, representational arts (148). Yet it is incumbent on the theorist, Metz maintains, to continue to locate somewhere, and to fashion (or refashion) the proper conceptual tools with which to understand, the cinematic incarnation of the ages-old fictional story. And to explain how films manage the tasks of communicating so powerfully on the cognitive as well as on the sensory and perceptual planes.

Metz remains ever-mindful here and, in fact, throughout his writings that the cinematic work is a hybrid, multi-faceted, complex form of cultural expression that severely challenges all efforts at theoretical encapsulation (let alone certain reductive theoretical approaches that have become more prevalent in recent decades). To the extent he gives voice in the present book to this wise position, and dives down to the level of description of a host of individual films – coupled with his adoption of a general stance compatible with post-structuralism, as Deane observes – it is tempting, from our present day standpoint, to suggest that he here anticipates the more recent stances and agendas of post-theory, piecemeal theory, and even ‘anti-theory.’ However Metz clearly remains steadfast in his commitment to the cause of theory, stressing the logical priority of a semiotic frame of reference, however difficult and perhaps quixotic as the quest to locate something in the nature of a generic “language

of film” may be. In this respect, the present publication does not fundamentally alter but reconfirms the reputation of its author, as among the first rank of those who have accepted the challenge (with its associated risks) to attain to a more comprehensive and nuanced vision of cinema and its unprecedented capacity to show, speak, inform, and mean, as well as entertain. For anyone with even a passing interest in any of the subjects addressed – only a small number of which have been mentioned here – this book is necessary reading. Both the publisher and translator have done an enormous service to film and media studies in making it now available to a much wider audience.

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