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## ENUNCIATION, FILM AND

Since the 1970s some scholars have applied the concept of enunciation, originally devised by Emile Benveniste for verbal language, to film. The starting point of the debate is Christian Metz's essay 'Story/Discourse (a Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)' (1975), in which Metz connects Benveniste's linguistic categories with concepts derived from psychoanalysis. Yet, the ensuing debate focused on the linguistic and semiotic dimension of the concept, either to propose an original conception of filmic enunciation or to deny the possibility of using it within the field of film studies. This entry examines the seminal essay by Metz, recaps the following discussion, and sketches recent developments in the debate.

### **Enunciation**

The French linguist Emile Benveniste proposed the concept of enunciation in a series of essays written between 1946 and 1970. Enunciation is the act of producing verbal utterances. Enunciation can also be defined as the act of appropriation and use of linguistic signs. In particular, there are three categories of signs which find their referential meaning only within utterances: the personal pronouns of the first and second person (me, you); pronouns and adverbs of time and space which refer to the 'here' and 'now' of the enunciation (this, that, yesterday, tomorrow, etc.); and the system of tenses (present perfect, future). These signs, once set, fulfil two functions: on the one hand, they inscribe subjects and conditions of enunciation within the utterance, and therefore they are 'marks'; on the other hand, they refer to the context of enunciation and are therefore 'deictics' (from the Greek verb *deiknumi*, which means 'to indicate').

Benveniste generally refers to situations of face-to-face dialogue, but in a 1959 essay he reflects on written statements; in this case he discovers two possibilities. In some cases, written utterances simulate face-to-face dialogue: in these cases Benveniste speaks of discursive enunciation, or simply *discourse*. In other cases, written utterances use repertoires of signs avoiding any reference to the situation of enunciation – it is third person language – and verbal tenses which refer to a past isolated from the present of the enunciation. In these cases, 'no one speaks here: the events seem to narrate themselves' (1971, 208). Benveniste calls this historical enunciation, or *history*.

### **Christian Metz's 'Story/Discourse (a Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)'**

Christian Metz revisited Benveniste's distinction between story and discourse in his 1975 essay, originally written for a collection in honour of Benveniste and then published in the book *The Imaginary Signifier*.

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'I'm at the cinema. The images of a Hollywood film unfold in front of me. It doesn't even have to be Hollywood: the images of any film based on narration and representation ... the kind of film which is the industry's business to produce' (Metz 1982, 91). In these opening lines of the essay, Metz defines the object of his discourse: the situation of fiction film watching. He believes that this situation is not 'natural'; it is constructed by the Cinema Institution within the cultural and ideological context of our society. Furthermore, this construction consists in the production of a particular regime of desire for movie watching. The essay inquires into the specific characteristics of such a regime of desire, and does so primarily by mobilizing tools from psychoanalysis.

Metz recovers Freud's analysis of voyeurism and exhibitionism as reciprocally mirrored perversions (especially as conducted in the 1915 essay 'Triebe und Triebchicksale'): the exhibitionist takes his or her pleasure in showing him/herself, while a voyeur's pleasure comes from watching someone else, and the pleasure of both requires the awareness of the active presence of the partner. However, this framework does not apply perfectly to the situation of fiction film watching, which is complicated by a split: 'The film is exhibitionist, and at the same time it is not ( ... ) The film knows that it is being watched, and yet does not know ( ... ) The one who knows is the cinema, the *institution* ( ... ) the one who doesn't want to know is the film, the *text*' (1982, 93–5). Indeed, film exhibitionism is subjected to a dynamic of disavowal: it is part of its cinematographic nature, but it has to be denied within its textual manifestation. The 'regime of desire' of the fiction film spectator derives from the particular kind of voyeuristic pleasure implied by such a situation: 'for this mode of voyeurism ( ... ) the mechanism of satisfaction relies on my awareness that the object I am watching is unaware of being watched' (1982, 95).

Metz connects this description of the film watching situation with a description of the corresponding internal logic of the fiction film text. In this regard, he borrows Benveniste's distinction between 'history' and 'discourse': 'In Emile Benveniste's terms, the traditional film is presented as story, and not as discourse. And yet, it is a discourse, if we refer it back to the film-maker's intention, the influence he wields over the general public, etc.; 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 enunciation, and masquerades as story' (91). This internal logic of the film text is produced by the particular system of voyeuristic pleasure sketched above: '[The] fundamental disavowal [governing spectator's pleasure] is what has guided the whole of classical cinema into the paths of "story", relentlessly erasing its discursive basis, and making it (at best) a beautiful closed object which must remain unaware of the pleasure it gives us' (94). It is for this reason that in the fiction film (as the essay ends up) 'It is the "story" which exhibits itself, the story which reigns supreme' (97).

### **The debate on film enunciation**

Some authors have criticized Metz's positions, and have radically denied the option to apply the linguistic concept of enunciation to film studies; on the contrary, others scholars have developed the idea of film enunciation, even without fully sharing Metz's ideas.

Within the first group, we find David Bordwell and Noël Carroll. The two thinkers share the idea that the language of cinema does not have deictic features similar to those of verbal language. They deny both that the film possesses a repertoire of forms comparable to the persons and tenses of verbal language, and that the film carries an activity

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comparable to that of verbal enunciation – and therefore they deny the fact that any ‘subjects’ of the enunciation should be found in the film. Any attempt to shift linguistic deictics to film language – for instance by personifying the film itself – ‘is just a bit of perfectly arbitrary word play that has nothing determinate to do with grammatical personhood’ (Carroll 1988, 154).

Bordwell focuses on both the roots and the consequences of the shift of the linguistic concept of enunciation to cinema studies. The roots are detected in Metz’s seminal essay. ‘Metz does not so much borrow from Benveniste as rewrite him, and not for the better’ (Bordwell 1985, 23). Indeed, the French theorist (i) turns abstract instances such as ‘films’ and ‘institution’ into personal subjects; (ii) overlaps the concept of enunciation and that of discourse, and (iii) transforms enunciation as a verbal activity into an optical activity (based on showing and watching actions).

There were two consequences of this approach, both negative. On the one hand, the pairs of concepts enunciation/utterance and history/discourse have produced different and not mutually comparable views and definitions among film scholars. On the other hand, these studies arbitrarily privileged a few film techniques: camera work and editing in particular.

In contrast, among the scholars who have taken up and developed a theory of film enunciation, the most comprehensive and influential work was Francesco Casetti’s *Inside the Gaze* (1991; originally published in 1986). Casetti borrows the project of developing a theory as an account of the fiction film watching situation from Metz. Moreover, like Metz, he thinks that the key feature of this situation is the constitution of the spectator as a subject. Finally, Casetti shares the idea with Metz that the spectator’s subjectivity is understandable in terms of visual enunciation, that is, as the result of a network of relationships between a subject who shows, a subject who is shown and a subject who watches.

The main point of detachment from Metz concerns the Italian theorist’s belief that the constitution of the spectator’s subjectivity is due to the use of certain formal configurations of cinema language. Furthermore, these linguistic forms combine both story and discourse features. Finally, from a methodological point of view, Casetti excludes psychoanalytic tools; rather, he builds a semiotic theory as a deductive device, and draws up a formal framework from which it should be possible to account for a number of variants empirically found.

According to Casetti, each filmic utterance implies an instance of origin, or ‘enunciator’, and an instance of destination, or ‘enunciatee’. The presence of two instances is constant and implicit, but it can be made explicit by various kinds of marks, and even figurativized by the characters who tell a story (narrators) or listen to it (narratees).

Enunciator, enunciatee and characters are differently arranged in the four major types of shot, already identified by classical film grammar: the objective, or nobody’s, shot – described as ‘I, the enunciator, and You, the enunciatee, look at Him, the character or the scene’; the interpellation (for example, the character looking into the camera), where ‘He and I look at You’; the subjective shot, where ‘You and He look at what I show you’; and finally the unreal objective shot (with spectacular view, unusual angles, or elaborated camera movements), described as ‘I show Him to You’.

### **From film enunciation to film experience**

Metz’s essay ‘The Impersonal Enunciation or the Site of Film’ (originally published in 1987 and translated into English in 1991) critically summarizes the debate and sets the ground for a deep rethinking of the concept.

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The intent of the essay is metatheoretical: Metz still does not inquire what the situation of fiction film watching is; rather, he asks how a film enunciation theory can properly account for this situation. Indeed, the French scholar identifies three risks of a theory of enunciation: ‘anthropomorphism, artificial use of linguistic concepts, and transformation of communication into enunciation (= “real”, extra-textual relationships)’ (1991a, 758). The first risk to avoid is the idea that the film situation is comparable to a face-to-face dialogue between the film and its viewer: the two entities have different statutes, and the interaction is asymmetric because the viewer cannot speak with the film. In other words, the film makes an enunciation statement without interaction (1991b, 200). The theory must therefore avoid configuring the two subjects in anthropomorphic terms: ‘If what is meant is the physical inscription of enunciation, using things’ names would be more appropriate. I would suggest “source (or origin) of the enunciation” and “enunciative target (or destination)” (1991a, 748).

The second risk is that the theory sees an effective reference to the real context of the vision in the film text. Against a ‘deictic’ theory of enunciation, Metz proposes a ‘reflective’ one: ‘Enunciation is the semiologic act by which some parts of a text talk to us about this text as an act’ (754). ‘Cinematic enunciation is always enunciation on the film. Reflexive, rather than deictic, it does not give us any information about the outside of the text, but about a text that carries in itself its source and its destination’ (762).

Finally, the last risk is that the theory sees the different forms of film enunciation as a rigidly fixed repertory (i.e. a ‘grammar’): ‘cinema does not have a closed list of enunciative signs, but it uses any sign ( ... ) in an enunciative manner’ (754–5). Indeed, voices on, off and over, intertitles, windows and mirrors within the diegetic world, subjective and objective shot etc. should be analysed for their enunciative value.

Metz’s essay made it possible to reset, restart, and recast the debate on film enunciation. In his concluding remarks, the scholar refers to two possible ‘stages’ of enunciation: ‘a textual stage (the “markers”; source and target), and a personal stage (imaginary author and spectator, enunciator and addressee; this is the level of attributions: the marker is ascribed to someone)’ (768). Metz’s theoretical approach is exclusively interested in the textual stage, probably because of the fear of coming back to an anthropomorphic conception of enunciation. Nonetheless, the subsequent reflection developed a further reflection on what Metz calls the ‘personal’ stage. In these cases, the aim of the theory is still to account for the film watching situation; however, the main object of study is not the film text any more: rather, scholars focus on the film experience itself, seen in its cognitive and affective dimensions, as a culturally embedded and a bodily situated phenomenon.

On the basis of this ‘experiential turn’, the main issues addressed by the debate on film enunciation return in two respects. On the one hand, the theory analyses the different ways in which the spectator constructs a representation of the enunciator and defines its degree of reliability from ethic, aesthetic, referential points of view (see, for instance, Odin 2000). On the other hand, the theory describes how, within the sensory motor dimension of his/her experience, the film viewer adopts a system of spatial and temporal orientation designed and driven by the audiovisual materials. In some cases, this orientation system is radically different from the actual situation of the film viewer: indeed, this should be called the ‘historical’ mode of orientation; in other cases, there is a partial overlap between the two systems – what should be called the discursive mode of orientation (see suggestions in Buckland 2000, 52–76).

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