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Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film, by Christian Metz. Translated by Cormac Deane, afterword by Dana Polan. Columbia University Press, 2016, 280 pp.

George Crosthwait

Christian Metz's gradual decrease in prominence within the anglosphere's academic canon has seen him become something of a relic—a dusty forebearer introduced on undergraduate film studies theory modules before moving swiftly on to cover more fashionable writers. His earlier concepts such as "identification mirror" and "the impression of reality" might be granted the benefit of a seminar, but his late work on cinematic enunciation has been largely neglected outside of Metz specialists and French-speaking scholars—a fact freely admitted in Cormac Deane's introduction to the English translation of Metz's *Énonciation impersonnelle, ou, Le site du film* (ix). Richard Rushton has even suggested that knocking Metz off his perch has become a rite of passage for film studies practitioners (11). His perceived efforts to categorise cinema as a series of linguistic signs have been criticised for being rigid and reductive, and his psychoanalytic framework disparaged by, notably, Noël Carroll. Whilst Metz's legacy might have frayed somewhat, it is still surprising that a book by one of the most recognisable names in film theory would take twenty-five years to receive an English translation. Content aside, Columbia University Press and translator Deane have plugged a gaping hole with this publication of Metz's final work, originally published in France in 1991.

Given Metz's reputation for dense theoretical writing, readers will likely be (pleasantly) surprised to discover how light of touch he is here. There is a humour and, at times, a lyricism that results in what Deane describes as "a very readable, if slightly weird, piece of scholarly writing" (xxi), and what Dana Polan, in his afterword, calls a "capricious romp across vast reaches of film history" (179). Polan also gleefully admits to imagining the perception-shattering shock of English-speaking readers encountering this tone in Metz's work for the first time (178). Indeed, *Impersonal Enunciation* is strewn with delightful comic or poetic phrasing: "Like a rising tide meeting a river in an estuary, like a look that a mirror intercepts and throws back at me" (27); "they drift back and forth with the ebb and the flow of the tide, the ebb and flow of story and adventure" (59). Readers may also be struck—and possibly a little overwhelmed—by the vast array of cinematic examples referenced in the book. Metz's cinephilia here is comparable to that of Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, but is even more wide-ranging and less auteurist, including films like *Thunderball* (Terence Young, 1965) and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988).

At its heart, *Impersonal Enunciation* is an exploration of how film communicates with its viewer through Metz's chosen example of self-reflexive, disruptive and metatextual devices.

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Metz organises his deftly-woven theory into three parts. The first rifts on Francesco Casetti's analysis of cinematic enunciation to develop the concept of *foyer* (Casetti, 1983). The second catalogues eleven examples of reflexive enunciative techniques in cinema. The third reiterates the claims of Part One, while seeking to pre-empt potential criticisms of his privileging of (nonhuman) enunciation in cinema. Deane suggests that readers begin with the second part and, with respect to his wishes, I shall do so in this review.

Part Two of *Impersonal Enunciation* is divided into eleven chapters, each one exploring a different reflexive trope, or, rather, ten categories plus one "fake heading", that of "neutral images" (24). These images and sounds are objective, free from any trace of enunciation and, according to Metz, entirely impossible. He writes that "the spectator cannot lose sight of the fact, not entirely anyway, that what he is watching is a film. So he is always conscious of enunciation in one way or another" (139). Even if these images did exist, they would appear to the spectator as corresponding to a frustratingly unreachable discourse; not a tangible act of enunciation, but "an absence of this feeling" (139). Essentially, the objective neutral image becomes subjective and is marked as soon as it is observed.

The fake heading and the preceding ten genuine articles are the most thrilling part (and, by some distance, the longest) of the book—so numerous are the techniques and cinematic examples conjured by Metz. The look to camera [1] acts as a mirror that reverses the direction of the projector beam in such a way as to undermine the cinematic apparatus, "the beam that comes from the eyes of a character *goes back against* (and stops in its own milieu) the flow that ordinarily issues from the projector" (27–8). Voice-off [2] "is the knowledge of an almost-friend, of a person walking by" (41). Metz calls it "peridiegetic", not part of the diegesis, yet part of an offscreen space inferred by the diegesis (41). Titles and written address [3] are "anchored, more firmly established; but contradictorily, it also acquires a more ambiguous […] status" (49). This form of enunciation usually has a narrative function, but its meaning is always doubled by the context dependent—and thus, mutable—interpretation of the viewer. The secondary screen [4] "has the effect of drawing attention to the main frame, that is to say, to the site of enunciation" (53). In this section, Metz also slyly teases the apparatus theorists of the 1970s (including himself) whilst suggesting that the deployment of a secondary screen makes it hard not to think about the cinematic apparatus (55). Metz returns to his older projects with a section on mirrors [5], outlining the psychoanalytic properties of self-identification whilst allowing for an interpretation that locates an authentic mirror (63). As with the direct address, "every mirror is like a camera (or a projector) because it 'projects' the image a second time" (63). Revealing the camera [6] is regarded as an act of "narcissism, whose roots are undermined because the camera *does not exist* for the viewer" (70). The camera does not reveal itself; instead it reveals the presence of another camera filming. The revealed camera becomes a diegetic object, not exposed, but absorbed into the film world. A section on films-within-films [7] contains one of several references to André Gide's work on *mise en abyme*. This device is often nestled within its framing film quite safely, or becomes so prominent that it is essentially rendered montage, or "symbiotic" (72; 75; 81). Metz gives an unusually extended analysis of Federico Fellini's *Intervista* (1987) due to its particularly nuanced application of a film-within-a-film which grants it the praise: "an almost unequalled source for enunciative moves and reflexive fireworks" (82). The POV (point of view) [8] provides "a *double doubling* of the enunciative moment" (106). It shares qualities with the mirror and the look to camera, but "the subjective image is *reflexive but not a mirror*. It does not reflect itself; rather, it reflects the source and the spectator" (106). In this sense, the POV works like revealing the camera in that the viewer becomes aware that they are sharing the gaze of the other, and that this subjective viewpoint is an alien subjectivity. The I-voice (or voiceover) [9],

to Metz's interest, has an unsettling diegetic status, "juxtadiegetic", as he puts it (113). Metz writes that the "I-voice, whatever its ruses or subtleties, always 'explains' images to us. It thereby brings into play in a single movement the two great features of metadiscourse: reflection and commentary" (120). As is often the case with these categories, the content of what is enunciated is rarely as important to Metz as the revelation of the act of enunciation itself. The final "true" section is the umbrella category of enunciation and style [10]. Here, Metz bunches together a variety of striking tropes such as jump cuts, changes in picture quality or deliberately conspicuous camera movements. He suggests that any challenges to the diegetic flow "are like complimentary wake-up calls for the spectator, jolts of the film, which all of a sudden designates itself, *comments directly on itself*" (134). It is not just the jolts that communicate with the viewer, as suggested by the false category, but rather the jolts bring about awareness of film's constant communicability.

Returning now to the first part of *Impersonal Enunciation*, Metz discerns four key areas of cinematic enunciation as expounded by Casetti: the objective view, which Metz will later debunk; interpellation (including direct address); the subjective view (POV); and the impossible objective view: "unusual angles ascribed to the auteur that are impossible to attach to any character" (14). Metz's key deviation from Casetti's work is the latter's adherence to human speakers and receptors (I and you), which he criticises for "anthropomorphism, an overemphasis on linguistics, and the slide of enunciation toward communication" (14). I am aware that I have occasionally used "communication" as a shorthand for "enunciation" in this review, but what Metz actually advises against is the idea of an actual, reciprocal exchange of information between film and viewer. Thus, Metz prefers the concept of *foyer*, or source, of enunciation—a nonbeing, non-site-specific enunciator which does not inherently create, or rely on a spectator subject. Ultimately, it is not any particular content or message that interested Metz, but the act of enunciation itself, which is a constant facet of every shot (23).

In the comparatively brief third part which bookends *Impersonal Enunciation*, Metz re-establishes his opening hypothesis. In particular, he emphasises the slippery nature of the *foyer* and the problems with the concept of a fixed subject–spectator in the enunciative exchange, "this can be summed up, for those who like things pithy, in the snappy phrase, 'the final I is always outside the text'" (155). In fact, in Metz's schema, enunciator and addressee are always absent from the frame (156). Metz's use of *foyer* and *cible* [target] aim to deanthropomorphise the subject–object position of the exchange and provide language that indicates only the absence of a fixed subject. It is, in this fashion, that enunciation is always "impersonal".

This English publication of *Impersonal Enunciation* should hopefully reignite some of that lost interest in Metz's work. Deane's translation, which captures the humour and *élan* of Metz's prose, may even rehabilitate his reputation for abstruse theorising (one wonders how many other postwar French philosophers and film theorists have been diminished by poor translations). Whether Metz is truly anticipating new media debates, as Deane suggests in his introduction (xv), is something that needs to be more fully examined and tested and is beyond the scope of this review. The book is essential reading for any scholars working on cinematic reflexivity or spectatorship and I would expect the second part of the book, although lengthy, to become an attractive teaching tool given its highly structured and accessible taxonomy of reflexive tropes. As a late work that both elaborates on, rewrites and criticises his earlier work, *Impersonal Enunciation* marks a vital, if sadly premature, coda to Metz's theoretical project.

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