

9. Responses to *Hors Cadre* on *The Imaginary Signifier*

Christian Metz

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Abstract

Christian Metz responds to a series of questions presented to him by the editorial board of the journal *Hors Cadre* in 1986. The questions seek to determine Metz's use of psychoanalytic concepts, especially the notion of the 'Imaginary'. Metz broadens out the debate by discussing narrative and fiction, as well as condensation/ displacement and to metaphor/ metonymy.

Keywords: Christian Metz, film theory, psychoanalysis, fiction

'Réponses à *Hors Cadre* sur *Le signifiant imaginaire*', Christian Metz. *Hors Cadre* 4 (1986), pp. 61–74. Reprinted with the permission of Presses Universitaires de Vincennes. ©PUV, Saint-Denis, 1986. Translated by Daniel Fairfax.

1.

Hors-Cadre: The Imaginary Signifier discusses the cinematic signifier by using concepts from psychoanalysis. Do the analyses you carry out modify the psychoanalytic concept of the imaginary? In particular, does the application of Lacanian concepts to the cinema lead to a certain number of displacements in the analytic domain?

Christian Metz: On the whole, I do not think that my psychoanalytic study of the cinema has had a significant retroactive impact on my understanding of psychoanalysis itself, nor has it displaced such concepts in my mind. In any case, for me, the effect is more general: as film theory is less advanced than many other theories, it can be enriched through contact with them, without the opposite being the case. (I am not talking about *initial impressions* or question setting, which the cinema and the image have in abundance; I am thinking of reflections that have already been developed.)

An example that plays an important part in my book is the role, and the modalities, of voyeurism for the film spectator. If we admit that my description is correct and useful for understanding the functioning of *the film*, then we must ask what it can contribute – apart from, perhaps, a modest change – to the very notion of the scopic drive in psychoanalysis, founded on a substantial and already long-established accumulation of observations and research, which, nourished by the fundamental contribution of clinical analysis, takes things back to their embryonic roots, and which, even when it is problematized, does so in the name of arguments and contributions situated in this field. The fable of the lion and the mouse¹ does not apply to all domains of knowledge, because each domain is not equally applicable to other domains.

Subsequently, I do not believe in interdisciplinarity, in exchanges, in the frequently promoted activity of *borrowing*. This emphatic declaration may be surprising, coming from a researcher who has spent his time applying linguistics and psychoanalysis to the cinema. But this is precisely where the misunderstanding lies: I have not applied anything, I have positioned the study of the cinema within more general concepts, which fully involve the cinema just as much as they involve other objects: the general processes of signification (whence the use of the term 'denotation', etc.), or of the imaginary subject, with concepts that have come from psychoanalysis but that are today, as with their predecessors, circulating far beyond their place of origin. In short, I wanted to place the cinema in the conceptual spheres it already belongs to, and which for a long time have only been kept separate from it by the fanatical or ignorant isolationism of its proponents, who are themselves guilty of the same imbecilic and arrogant contempt in which the intellectual Establishment held the cinema. After all, what is so extraordinary about observing that the cinema depends (to a large extent) on scopic passion, that it pushes this passion to a very high degree, and that we should therefore take a look at the only science that has reflected on this passion at length? And what does it mean to claim that the cinema 'is' psychoanalytic, which, by the way, does not mean anything? Does it

not, as it happens, possess many other characteristics? And are there not many other characteristics that give prominence to scopic passion? Will we say that the human being is 'chemical' because we are governed (in part) by (some of) the laws of organic chemistry, that also apply to numerous animals? Well, my work can certainly be related to organic chemistry. It is applied, and sometimes more than one would like. We never apply anything.

But I shall return to your question, or at least to something you said: no, I do not have the impression that my work on the cinema has 'modified' the psychoanalytic concept of the imaginary. As you know, in Lacan's thinking, it is closely tied to the concepts of the 'symbolic' and the 'real'. It has a distinguished history in psychoanalysis itself, and its influence reaches everywhere within the field. In order to displace it, more will be needed than my book. Although I had no particular desire to use the concept, I found it to be entirely satisfactory. It helped me to understand better the fundamental seduction of the spectator's position in the cinema, and enabled me to 'make progress' (?) on one of the two fronts that were present (namely, the film); I could not and would not do so on both fronts at once.

But I begin to understand the reasoning behind your question, especially if we apply it to concepts other than the 'Imaginary'. In the last text of my book, 'Metaphor/Metonymy, or The Imaginary Referent', which occupies half the volume, there are passages that belie the preceding remarks. Either they no longer treat the cinema, or they only reach it at the end of the road, after the core of the 'work' is over, in order to draw didactic illustrations from it. These passages tackle the 'internal' discussion of properly psychoanalytic problems. Thus, we find propositions for a new theory of censorship, conceived as the very *gap* between the secondary process and the primary process, and not like a barrier or dyke separating them. Yes, it is true that this idea is born from my work on cinema, where the supposed barrier is particularly intangible, the oscillation of the primary processes are unstable. But the same text also speaks of language systems, etymology, rhetorical figures (overused and fixed, or, on the contrary, more or less new), and directly interweaves the two aspects in its very composition, in such a way that it is not always easy – even (or especially?) for me – to know *what* has displaced what.

Your question also leads me to think about the ideas I developed in the same section of the book on the subject of the famous homology between metaphor and condensation, and metonymy and displacement. In Lacan, there is a kind of flash of brilliance, a quite astute intuition, which he has not developed, clarified, or 'followed up on'. And yet, when we look at it in detail, we encounter difficulties relating to the very nature of the

signifying material, in particular the danger of confusing those relations that are specific to the referent (metaphor and metonymy) and those that are specific to the discourse (paradigm and syntagm). Most frequently, the latter disappear and are 'merged' into the former. Thus, we often speak of a simple syntagm as metonymy. In fact, however, metonymy, when it truly does arise, can take the form of either a syntagm or a paradigm, based on whether its two terms are explained, or whether one of the two terms is left to mental association. I have tried to shed light on these different cases, as well other difficulties of the same type, in order to respond to the meticulous and obstinate demands of textuality, which is not content with two major axes, in order to draw out from Lacan's homology some of the consequences about which it is silent.

At the end of the day, I believe that something of my work is re-inscribed in the psychoanalytic field. But this something is rather small when compared to the set of psychoanalytic concepts I had available to me. And then, is it really necessary to speak, as the agent of this re-inscription and this partial displacement, of my 'work on the cinema'? It is more general; it is also my work on the figural, my linguistic reflections and, at times, my direct interventions in the psychoanalytic field. And yet, all this is done in the framework of a book on the cinema. The *weight* of the cinema has certainly played, for me, a driving force at once more diffuse and more permanent than what I am clearly aware of. At bottom, your question has slightly 'displaced' my initial impression...

2.

Hors-Cadre: What exactly does the term 'imaginary signifier' refer to? To the imaginary character of the material base and/or the perceptual regime that the cinema imposes on the spectator? Does this Imaginary Signifier suppose the 'Imaginary Referent' that you define by analytic and linguistic categories, or would it admit a different type of referent? And which one?

Metz: For me, your question is very central. In effect, I chose the term 'Imaginary Signifier' because I found in it the merit of referring to both traits that you indicate, the imaginary characteristic of the material base and the perceptual regime that the cinema privileges in the spectator (I will not adopt as my own view what you say: '*imposes* on the spectator').

Hence, the regime of belief is influenced by the nature of the signifier. But it is also dependent on other factors, because the fictional target, the

consensual credulity, the ‘temporary suspension of disbelief’ of Anglo-Saxon literary theory, can also appear in the reading of a novel or in a theatrical scene. Fundamentally, the phenomenon is always identical: a mix of belief and disbelief, a split in perception, vividly evoking what psychoanalysts call fetishistic disavowal (“I know very well... but all the same...” [Octave Mannoni]). The attitude of the film spectator is also partly modeled on the Western (Aristotelian) tradition of art as imitation (the imitation of everyday life, or of a mythical universe). On the other hand, we see that this psychic splitting, which defines fiction as such, takes substantially different forms when we pass from one fictional practice to another. We are not astonished when a room has three walls instead of four in the theatre, nor when objects in the cinema are made out of light and shadow. This is how the characteristics of the signifier currently work, and they have been fully internalized by the public (the Signifier is social and historical). Thus, in each narrative and figurative art, the exact proportion of belief and disbelief is different, as is the *line of demarcation* between them. We accept the immobility and the silence of photographed characters; we are more likely to protest against their being out of focus.

It seems to me that if the cinema frequently tells stories (in good or bad films), then this is for three principal reasons: 1. The great cultural tradition that I have just spoken about, which represents an enormous pressure. 2. The exceptional wealth of the signifier in its *indices of reality*: sound, movement, color, the capacity to record practically anything whatsoever. 3. The ostensibly imaginary character of all this wealth. The ‘imagic’ is denounced, exploited, and only made possible by the *act of montage*. Whence its power: we cannot ‘edit’ the real, but what we do edit in film truly resembles it. The imagic, in one fell swoop, turns everything into narrative, and transfers to its credit the guarantees of reality that it employs. Otherwise, for example, the theatre – where the signifier is even richer in its allusions to reality, because it consists in a portion of the real itself – should have a stronger belief effect (I have in mind, of course, the belief in the story, not the belief in the spectacle; they are inversely proportional). The mode of cinematic belief has, as its essential trait, this double and remarkable movement: to make the real function to the benefit of the imaginary, to weave from compelling likenesses *the very thread of the fable*, and to thus awaken our old desires, to awaken the enchanted child who wanted to be told stories in the evening.

The cinematic signifier is imaginary because it is photographic. It is an imprint, a duplicate, a ‘reproduction’, the reflection of something else, the necessarily unreal correlative of a given referent. We have here one of the great difficulties that experimental film encounters in its experiments, to

which I pay more attention now than I did before. Even if it abolishes all narration, which happens a lot, its frames continue to represent something (even if this something is greatly *diminished*): reflections, rapid and illegible editing, long, immobile, empty shots. It must reckon with the weight of the *dispositif*, which single-handedly sketches vague narratives at every moment. There is, of course, as in all of these problems, cases that border on the limits, which we still do not know if we should class as cinema – at least in the ordinary sense of the word. Examples include films made by directly scratching the celluloid (when they do not reconstitute, by this very means, a figurative picture), the camera-less films of Giovanni Martedi, etc.

As for the imaginary referent which your question raises, it is the (imaginary) bloc of reality the spectator supposes that the story has been *taken* from. ‘Suppose’ is not the right word; it is more a case of a diffuse but potent feeling that presents itself as an obvious truth. Literary theory prefers to speak of referential illusion. In Combray, there is a man named Legrandin, and Proust relates some (but not all) of the episodes of his existence: this, in effect, is a veritable *inverse illusion*, because, in reality, Legrandin has no existence other than a textual one, and he in no way ‘transcends’ the novel, the only thing to speak about him. But this illusion is also a fundamental intellectual *and* affective need. ‘*Later*’, we will say, ‘Legrandin became incapable of hiding that he was a snob’: but the principal function of this ‘later’ is to cover the text’s momentary silence on Legrandin and his disappearance *from the page*, to make this hiatus resemble those in life, by mentally interpolating into the text the passage of time that would have elapsed. Every narrative proposes that, in some *elsewhere*, the things narrated have really existed. Here, the referent is an effect of narration, and the fictional narration (even if there is another one) does not escape it. Certainly, it leaves us (by definition) very divided as to the reality of the referential real, but not as to the existence of a layer of deduction – one that is still, however, imaginary – which is indispensable to the comprehension of the simplest sequence. If we see the heroine at the top of a stairwell, and then, in the following shot, at the bottom of the stairs, we suppose that, in some enigmatic (and familiar) temporality, she has descended the stairs and that ‘we have only been shown’ the beginning and the end of the action. We reason as if this woman had an existence beyond her filmic existence, an existence authorizing inferences analogous to those of everyday life. This effect also plays a major role in the emotions provoked by fiction films, when they provoke them. We are not attached to characters in the same way we are to flesh and blood creatures; nor, however, do we see them as

mere creatures of celluloid. They are more like those beings that appear to us in a memory or a dream – the unreal real.

For me, the domain of the ‘fiction’, ‘narrative’ or ‘diegetic’ film (I am provisionally employing these terms as equivalents) is not reduced to a completely linear narrativity (closed in on itself, depending on the story and on it alone), nor to ‘chubby’ or rounded [*mafflue*] narrativity, as Dominique Noguez humorously puts it. I do not see why *narrative* should become a synonym for *merely narrative*. Eisenstein’s films are diegetic, those of Ruiz and Straub are also partly diegetic. In this problem, there are two common reactions I have difficulty understanding. Firstly, if a story is disordered, erratic, unraveled, when and how does it cease to be a story? Take *Déetective* [1985] by Godard, for instance: four different narratives, all curtailed; but there is the grand hotel, the aviator and his wife, the prince and the young girl, etc. In short, a place, a time, and characters. Evidently, the fiction is not sutured, not ‘filled’, the film plays on its gaps and defective links. Its imaginary referent, it is true, is less complete and consistent than in a commercial film; it is weakened, assaulted. But it is there. In a more general way, I have the same impression when watching the films of Bergman, Resnais, Antonioni, Eisenstein, Welles, etc. – that is, films of a self-aware, emancipated, ‘intelligent’ type. Often, the ingenuities of enunciation, montage, recurring motifs, complex layering, etc., make us forget the story to a significant extent. But it has not disappeared, it is even indispensable to everything else. In short, to answer your question, it seems to me that the domain of the ‘imaginary referent’, of the fiction, is much vaster than we sometimes say, when we reduce it to the model known (God only knows why) as Balzacian. For me, it does not correspond to a type of writing [*écriture*] but takes numerous, diverse forms. It translates a general tendency of the cinema, unevenly affirmed by the films.

Is this equivalent to saying that the cinema (and, by extension, the imaginary signifier) never escapes narrative, and that the nature of the ‘medium’ determines that of the product without any leeway? No. There are, firstly, variations that I have just mentioned, and which are important. Filling a film with a diegesis varies enormously, even when the fiction is strong. A narrative film like *Citizen Kane* [1941] says at the same time plenty of other things; it is not overwhelmed by its story. Very often, it is ‘from within’ that fiction films escape from the fictional regime, even in the classical American cinema, which ‘works’ more than we say it does. And there have also been, with Anglo-Saxon experimental cinema (the London Film Co-op, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr, etc.), radical attempts to compromise the very functioning of the referential illusion,

thanks to the Franciscan, minimalist impoverishment of the profilmic, or by disrupting the process of filming. The film is reduced to a flicker effect, or to a panoramic to-and-fro movement on a banal, unrecognizable object. In order for the diegesis to disappear entirely, it would be necessary for the film to show *nothing* (certain films by Peter Gidal are not far from this). In general, there nonetheless remains something and, as I said a short time ago, the phantasy of the spectator – both the *desire of the narrative* and the *need to understand* – can take a hold in order to enlarge and embellish it. Films also become fictional (more or less) through their reception. Here, we encounter the problem of social demand: experimental films, in spite of their interest, may well be condemned for a long time yet to minuscule audiences. In any case, they show that the imaginary signifier is capable of completely ridding itself of the imaginary referent. The film itself becomes the referent, with all its techniques commenting on the act of filming. These films are self-referential, or ‘comparative’ (if you like) when they allude to the procedures of conventional cinema by re-presenting and deforming them.

In sum, if you ‘add’ radical films and the ultra-narrative operations of narrative films, you will perceive that my ‘imaginary referent’ leaves a lot of room around it. But at the same time – a minor paradox – it is omnipresent, for everything else is almost always articulated around it, since its role (even on a manifest level) is considerable in the great majority of films, and also because it corresponds to a socially dominant regime of reading.

3.

Hors-Cadre: What is the ‘imagic’ and how does it favor the functioning of the imaginary?

Metz: The imaginary does not have an unlimited choice from among the sensory organs susceptible to using it. The so-called proximal senses (touch, smell, taste, if we adopt the categorization currently used) are strongly attached to reality, to the oral and anal drives. They give rise to poor, unfocused ‘images’ that technology has not undertaken to reproduce, at least not on a major scale. So, we are left with the superior senses classified as ‘distal’: hearing and sight. The cinematic imaginary largely rests in these two senses. However, for reasons that do not apply to the cinema, the visual register seems closer to the phantasmatic realm than the auditory register, except, of course, in the case of spoken language. The dream, although populated with spoken words, is above all a succession of images, as is

daydreaming. Ardent passion passes through the desire to see (*nudity* is, by the way, a state without any acoustic expression, a purely visual notion), while the innumerable games of exhibitionism and voyeurism do not have equivalents on the auditory level. Perhaps it is necessary to attribute this striking discrepancy to the fact that the eye is much more precise than the ear and depicts objects better to us, as is the case with erotic representations of phantasies. The acoustic register – in everyday life, as well as in modern technology – has the misfortune of being caught between two extremely powerful neighbors, both capable of exact *expressions* and not only impressions: namely, the image and the language system [*langue*]. All this is, incidentally, only a difference of degree (see the importance of Lacan's invocatory drive); similarly, the cinema frequently has recourse, not always imaginatively, to the resources of sound.

There is another factor, specific to the cinema and to it alone. Sonic data are reproduced with all their phenomenal properties. If the sound engineer has done a 'good job', nothing distinguishes the sound of an airplane in the cinema from its equivalent on an airfield. 'Sounds have no image', said Balázs, referring to sound cinema. Filmic sounds are not reproductions but real sounds, or, if you prefer, reproductions, secondary productions of the same perceptive nature as the primary productions. The image, on the contrary, is immediately demarcated from its model by the absence of the third dimension. It records a permanent phenomenological deficit in comparison to the object which, due to this fact, it can only 'imitate'. *It is an effigy*, whereas sound is not. It is thus the most apt to lead the entire film toward the imaginary, the tale, the narrative. It is a very lifelike imaginary, one which is *furnished*, 'realized' earlier, but to which the specific coefficient is selectively absent. And it is through this 'default' that all the powers of the dream and desire come into play.

In short, the 'imagic', for me, is the adjective that, contrary to the 'imaged', corresponds truly to the *image*, with the same force and the same polysemy.

4.

Hors-Cadre: You insist on the importance of substitutional pressures in the psychic functioning of the spectator. Would the specific function of the cinema in this domain not be, under the force of the imagic flux, to exacerbate these substitutional pressures by prohibiting them from being fixed at any moment? Would you go so far as to speak of film as a support for desire, which could also mean a corset, substitute or third leg?

Metz: Yes, I think that film *can* play the role of a support for desire, when desire is deficient in those who go to the cinema because they do not know what to do. It can equally exacerbate a desire that is already strong, which would just about define cinephilia: this is your third leg...

The cinema is much less suitable than photography at *fixing* desire, or more exactly the phantasy of desire. As you recall, projection – the constantly changing audiovisual flux – renders the emergence and stabilization of a *fetish* difficult, a role that the photograph, by contrast, easily assures. The specificity of the cinema lies in *fetishistic activity*: modifications of framing, camera movements, etc. Change counts more than control, as when erotic passion impatiently delays its own satisfaction.

But film, which is mobile, is also fixed: fixed *in relation to the spectator's phantasy*. It is *this* film, and not another one, that we cannot change. We cannot lengthen by a tenth of a second the troubled gaze of the character, or add a little gray to the overly vivid color we feel assailed by. The film might be a dream, but it is somebody else's dream. There is thus always a distance, one that stands in relation to a fixed point: the film in itself (which switches over to the side of the real). On this basis, there are several – or at least two or three – possibilities. If the distance is too great, there is rejection, boredom, filmic displeasure. If, on the contrary, it diminishes, identification and projection can make up for this, at least during the film: the spectator is as ecstatic as he would be if his own phantasy were being told to him. Without going quite this far, he can receive and sustain exchanges with his own images, a foreign but sympathetic daydream, or can intermittently project himself into the film, or only in certain of its motifs, etc.

In sum, if the film 'fixes' the phantasies of us all, it confronts us with a phantasy that is now fixed. Fixed but mobile. This is why everything depends, as in friendship, on the relationship of forces in each singular *encounter*. Depending on who the spectator is, the moment, the film, the imaginary of the cinema can be a prison (or a corset, as you put it) or a springboard, or it can play these two roles at once.

5.

Hors-Cadre: What relation does the imaginary have with the image of the ego in the interpellation of the spectator? Does the spectatorial imaginary only develop through the ego-image? More broadly, what is the status of the signifier in the imaginary of the spectator?

Metz: The signifier is inscribed in the imaginary of the spectator with significant force. It is fundamentally important, and this occurs on at least two levels: the signifier of the *cinema*, common to all films (= Jean-Louis Baudry's '*dispositif*'), which, as if to answer you in advance, I call the imaginary, and which I will not discuss at present. And then there is the *work* of the signifier in each film. Spectatorial reception is all the more permeable, all the more vulnerable if it is not aware of this work. Textual analysis unearths a part of it, but at the same time it creates a new frontier and opens the way to infinite analysis, which is, incidentally, the most beautiful of all things. We will never know that what has moved us in a particular on-screen face, which we declare to be 'harmonious', is, in reality, the combination of framing and lighting. If the beautiful shot of a landscape we speak so much about had lasted 40 seconds longer, we would not have spoken about it. A particular shot/reverse-shot, banal at eight frames, becomes patently leaden on the ninth frame. Our imaginary is happy to record the effect, and it is the sum of these 'details' (which are mentally tied to the diegesis, that is, *fictionalized [romancés]*), which is very largely responsible for our overall reaction to the film.

Certain films, including the most admirable works, seek to *inscribe* these effects, rather than abandon them to secrecy and manipulation. But since the procedure of inscription is itself an effect, nothing has been fundamentally altered, apart from the fact that the augmented complexity of the *dispositif* offers an intrinsic interest.

In my book, the ego-image is given as *absent*. I describe the filmic screen as a specular space where we can see everything except our own image. This, of course, only applies to the physical appearance of the subject. As for the image of the ego in the psychic sense, it is a point that, until now, I have barely discussed. But it seems to me, in fact, that the filmic imaginary can only be developed in close relation to the ego-image of each spectator. The ego-image is deep down the only thing I *bring* to the screening (along with my own phantasies, but there is no real difference between the two). We have other strong images, like those of beloved people or places, but they do not stay with us. The ego-image is the only one that walks along the street with us (as in *Lady in the Lake* [Robert Montgomery, 1947]), the only one which is directly (and *continuously*) sustained by that of which it is an image, even if it is to restore a somewhat distorted event. It is also the only analogical instance we have to *follow* what the on-screen characters are doing. For example, from what other source could we draw any kind of knowledge on what it means for a character to *cry*? How to understand the acts of the villain, if not by mobilizing our own real or virtual evil side?

This option is most often unconscious; we encompass it in the very notion of *understanding*. It relates, I should stress, to the ego-image much more than the ego (we do not truly know ourselves), unless we define the ego, in the spirit of Lacan, as a *flight of images* [*fuite des images*]. This is also why the same film can be interpreted in an infinitely diverse manner: each one has assembled major pieces of its being, which itself escapes into multiple images...

Note

1. [In Aesop's fable, the small mouse is able to help the mighty lion.]