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Heath: Questions of Cinema**

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**Metz: The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema / Heath:
Questions of Cinema**

Reviews and Discussion

Christian Metz. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, 327 pp. \$22.50.

Stephen Heath. *Questions of Cinema.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981. 257 pp. \$22.50 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Ian Duncan
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"Just after Marx, just before Freud," declares Stephen Heath in the opening chapter of his book, "we have a certain power of cinema." In other words, Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis may claim joint interpretive privilege for the discussion of cinema because all three institutions emerge at, are constituted by, the same historical moment. But what the critic often neglects to take into account are his own conditions of discourse. The institution of textual criticism from which he speaks also appears on the academic curriculum at this historical moment.

Neither of the present studies, by Heath and Christian Metz, really faces the problem of its own social and historical status. This is not so much the lack of a certain trendy self-consciousness as symptom of a larger rhetorical problem, involving the relationship of the text to its subject and to its readership. Both Metz and Heath represent the strenuous methodological blend of semiotics, psychoanalysis, and (in Heath's case) Marxism which dominates current theoretical discussion of film texts and the institution of cinema. Such a "film theory" presents familiar paradoxes with a new urgency: while the literary tradition and the fine arts are the property of an educated elite, for whom the critic performs an acknowledged (if controversial) mediating function, film is still a "mass media" form. The territorial division between its social operation and the activity of the academic critic is almost absolute; as a result, "film theory" has tended to frequent the interdisciplinary shelter of "cultural studies," in which less attention is paid to New-Critical analysis of the text in and for itself than to the possibilities of sociological extrapolation.

This is no doubt as it should be; but the situation raises an important question for both books here, especially Heath's, which purports to be Marxist and thus makes extracurricular, Utopian gestures. Does film theory (as distinct from journalistic criticism) chart its own province of self-legitimizing discourse, or a larger area of concern; can it tell us something about the cinema and ourselves, rather than about itself?

Christian Metz's is both the more elegant and more self-contained of the enterprises considered here. Since the 1960s Metz has been the most influential of the French semiotic film theorists; in the essays collected in this book (1973–1976) he modifies his earlier phenomenological formalism with an emphasis on Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly Jacques Lacan's powerful version of it. The two major essays in the book attempt to construct a theoretical model for cinema as psychophenomenological apparatus, first by describing the psychoanalytic ground for the operation of the cinematic signifier—film as text and institution composed of certain formal strategies and codes—and then by exploring the relationship of primary (unconscious) and secondary (linguistic) orders in the process of signification, through the mediation of psychoanalytic and semiotic-rhetorical terminologies. If, as Metz argues, cinema provides privileged access to the primary, then his critique and redefinition of the terminologies ought to tell us something about the primary order and modes of secondaryization. The primary-order attentions of psychoanalysis and the secondary-order attentions of linguistics cover together the entire semiotic field; thus Metz aspires to a theoretical construction of the signifying operation itself, at a general level.

Metz begins with a strong account of the psychological operation of film. This depends on the bold assumption of a structural correspondence, if not homology, between the conceptual model of the perceiving ego and the topographical apparatus of the cinema. Metz argues that the power of the cinematic experience lies in the phenomenological status of the screen as "other space," which constitutes the viewer as "transcendental subject" by establishing its activity in a dimension separate from him. In the movie theater, the radical separation of the spectacle (as record, trace, representation of an absent scene) means that the viewer can only take part as detached and all-perceiving eye, a kind of technological realization of Emerson's "transparent eyeball," a figure for an absolute and unconditioned act of seeing as a site for the spectator, in which, indeed, the spectacle is conditional on the act of seeing. Thus, the spectator is constituted as phenomenological "first cause," secure in the authority of his look so long as the film maintains (as it is codified to do) the coherence of that look as intelligible construction of the world. Metz supports this by reference to Lacan's famous "mirror-phase" theory: the mirror phase represents the subject's entry into discourse, that myth moment (the infant held up to the mirror sees itself and its parent) when objectification of the self and the other establishes once and for all the presence/identity of the self in terms of the other. The cinematic screen becomes a sophisticated mirror, in which narrative is the enactment of spectator identification through filmic look, its codes of closure restoring the self against the other as "pure act

of perception." Metz identifies this illusion of perceptual mastery which the film exists to create and to legitimate with the Lacanian realm of the "imaginary": that ideal space of ontological wholeness and freedom. Stephen Heath is to criticize André Bazin's formulation of this as phenomenological idealism (pp. 42–45), arguing that the perceiving ego is not preexistent and autonomous but is in fact constructed by the cinematic apparatus as a condition of the latter's function. The only way to avoid theoretical circularity at this point is to go on to consider the cinematic apparatus in terms of its constituting "real conditions of society and men." However, Metz does not pursue this emphasis in these essays, exposing himself to a similar criticism.

Metz's description so far corresponds with standard structuralist accounts of narrative and its ideological operation. He argues that the cinematic regime enjoys special power, invested in its explicit separation of spectator from spectacle: the latter, the object of scopophilic desire, is an absence vividly and concretely rendered as presence (the peculiar verisimilitude of the photographic illusion). Metz's account of this is persuasive and turns out to be a more "scientifically" elaborate version of Coleridge's pithy description of the psychology of theatrical spectacle as "willing suspension of disbelief":

In order to understand the fiction film, I must both "take myself" for the character (= an imaginary procedure) so that he benefits, by analogical projection, from all the schemata of intelligence that I have within me, and not take myself for him (= the return to the real) so that the fiction can be established as such (= as symbolic): this is *seeming-real*. Similarly, in order to understand the film (at all), I must perceive the photographed object as absent, its photograph as present, and the presence of this absence as signifying. . . . (p. 57)

Metz's terms, here as elsewhere, tend to suggest a sophisticated Freudian-Lacanian mythological or allegorical schema, in which castration is the figure for the subject's real "lack," the phallus his imaginary object of pursuit along the chain of signifiers that constitute his discourse, fetishism the substitutive impulse by which he continuously reconstructs himself in terms of the other. Metz adopts this system in the attempt to achieve a "psychoanalysis of the cinematic signifier," rather than elaboration of yet another set of terms for allegorical closure upon a signified: the fiction film is the arena of discourse in which the categories of imaginary, real, and symbolic continually play against, shift into one another. Unless we accept the global authority of these terms, and their (nevertheless) more overtly allegorical extensions, however, the theoretical enterprise risks reducing itself to an exercise in self-legitimation. Metz, intelligent and scrupulous as he is, does not always escape this risk.

Having established correspondences between film experience and states of dream and fantasy, Metz goes on in the second movement of the book to examine the relation in the signifying process between the orders of the primary (unconscious) and secondary (linguistic). He does this through a long and detailed inquiry into the constitutive terms of both orders: those of psychoanalysis on the one hand, and those of rhetoric and structural linguistics on the other. This allows Metz to explore the possibilities of homology between them in a coherent theoretical structure, and to define the theorist's "enormous question" to be that of "the deep-structural grounding of the cinema as a social institution." Following Lacan's claim that the unconscious is structured as a language, Metz takes the historical repertoire of the "figural" to be a codification of "the driving forces that shape language." Operations of metonymy and metaphor (Metz gives an interesting account of how these figures have acquired their special authority) describe the force field between primary and secondary levels. If the key issue, in other words, is the relation between the conscious and unconscious, then there must be "a semiology of the primary" in order for psychoanalysis and linguistics to have anything to say to each other; in terms of which, film, as established earlier in the book, occupies the privileged site of "the most vital meshings of primary and secondary."

At this point the theorist runs the risk of setting apart the primary or unconscious as indeed "primary," a realm prior to and thus transcending discourse: the realm of signifying origin. Metz avoids this, and the consequent, taxonomizing lure of the hierarchical, by following Lacan's abolition of the traditional dualism between an instinctual-transcendental primary and a social-discursive secondary. Lacan's influential rereading of Freud has replaced the latter in the massive epistemological movement away from the nineteenth-century ontological dualism between latent, essential, generative "depth" and manifest, expressive, disseminated "surface"; Lacan holds that "the unconscious is always everywhere present," as discourse, interface with the other, that there is no categorical division between primary and secondary, only "degrees of secundarization." Hence, Metz's historically scrupulous interrogation of terms concludes by collapsing binary oppositions (condensation is "a displacement effect"), dissolving false homologies (between "metaphor/paradigm" and "metonymy/syntaxm"), and identifying dissymmetries, categories which overlap, terms which inextricably define each other. Metz's "comparative typology of semiological systems" sets out "four main types of textual concatenation," not as a taxonomy of categories into which the textual instance may be slotted, but as "contact points": the four terminological poles (metaphor/metonymy, paradigm/syntaxm, primary/secondary, condensation/displacement) define "operational affinities"

rather than homologies and establish the "symbolic matrix" across which signification may be traced as trajectory, process, and operation rather than disposition of fixed units.

We might make the objection that Metz's exhaustive and ingenious schema exhibits a purely synchronic authority: that it occupies its own autonomous theoretical space and is not equipped (in these essays at least) to deal with the contingencies of the diachronic, of history itself. Despite local exorcizing gestures, the shadow of a retotalizing phenomenological formalism haunts Metz's study, since he does not in the end consider cinema "as a social institution" to any significant extent, nor does he return his model to the actual historical instant and its field of conditions and effects. This brings in a major rhetorical contradiction: despite the Lacanian frame of reference, Metz's emphasis tends to suggest that psychic "deep structures" do in fact form the determining ground for the social institution of cinema. This at the very least begs the dangerous question of priority. In the end, I am tempted to read Metz's typological matrix as self-validating, a monument to its own very considerable methodological finesse. Metz does not demonstrate his model by any detailed, large-scale application to the historical, specific instance; the few examples of analysis he does admit are few and desultory.

It is left to Stephen Heath to describe the historical-political dimension of Metz's "psychoanalysis of the cinematic signifier." Ideology is the transforming term which allows Heath to undertake a genuine extension of Metz's theory (in which the term remains a rhetorical feint). Heavily influenced by Metz, Heath pursues the synthesis of Marxist and Freudian terms established by the Frankfurt school, and his theoretical working models are up-to-date Althusserian. Thus, ideology is defined as that "real instance in which the imaginary is realized"—the same ideal area of Metz's account. Lacan's emphasis upon the problematic formation of the subject in discourse has allowed an effective Marxist appropriation of his psychoanalysis, through the radical historicization of such terms as "discourse" and "subject." Heath gives the following characteristic paraphrase of Metz's account of the "willing suspension of disbelief": "ideology works over the symbolic on the subject for the imaginary," where the imaginary is the site of resolution of the "specific contradictions of a particular socio-historical moment" (Althusser), established by the signifying operations of the film (the symbolic).

Heath's synthesis of Metzian semiotic-psychoanalytic and Althusserian Marxist terms is generally persuasive. He follows Metz to describe "narrativization" as the codifying principle of this ideological process: narrative as a formal economy of psychic energies, the investment, play and closure of desire, containment of the movement of the signifier, construction of the intelligible and coherent for the subject.

Historically, "novelization" is the principal narrative enterprise of a bourgeois culture, in which the fiction of the subject's identity is constructed by the relation of his codes of individual meaning to those of social determination. These ideas inform Heath's local accounts of filmic language and codes, narrative space, sound and image, sign-in-process, etc., which often demonstrate a Barthesian acuteness. Heath's descriptions of specific films in these terms (by Hitchcock, Nagisa, Oshima, Welles, Snow) are often brilliant. His exemplary reading of *Touch of Evil* (Chapter 5, "Film, System, Narrative") allegorizes the film text as a narrative containment of "real" social contradiction: the conflict between "law" and "personal problems," definition of the place of the woman, object of desire, with respect to the law. Heath is right to recognize that much of the power of this film resides in its recognition (and partial, knowing repression) of its own textual excesses, contradictions, and perversities that resist and subvert the narrative containment. This undermines Heath's general, polemical principle, which tends, as we shall see, to make the text more ideologically monolithic, less discursively playful and deconstructive, than it is.

Heath defines the key formal principle for the film's narrative-ideological operation with the infelicitous metaphor of "suture," derived from one of Lacan's seminars. "Suture" is the hold of the narrative upon the subject, the symbolic binding of the two upon the site of the imaginary. This is the term of the strategy of semantic gap-filling and narrative closure, the movements of identification and objectification which constitute and fix the subject within his discourse (for Lacan, the subject is always "an effect of the signifier"), which provide the site for the imaginary as fiction of the subject in the symbolic.

Behind this rather dizzying terminology, the basic theoretical tenet is that the ideological power of film derives from the persuasive force (in the conditions described by Metz) with which its narrative is able to play upon the spectating subject and construct for him the illusion of his own identity as a fixed, stable, coherent psychic area within which the displacing and deconstructing contradictions of the social real are resolved. We have made the anti-idealist critical return to the Kantian definition of the experience of art as the site for freedom, identity, meaning, etc. Heath exalts the concept of suture as much more than another local code, as in fact global signifying principle, the central operative term of all narrative. The concept is actually very close to some of Eisenstein's discussions of montage as central signifying principle, in particular to Eisenstein's later definition of the imaginary power of montage (raising the subject to a state of "organic" and coherent being through "synchro-

nization of the senses"), rather than to his earlier revolutionary and deconstructive emphasis (see Eisenstein 1942, 1949).¹

Heath's long chapter "On Suture" (pp. 76–112) forms the theoretical center of his study. Much of it charts the ground of Lacanian psychology which underlies the whole book; the real issues of the Lacanian contribution remain formidable and remote from many readers, partly because they are so uncompromising. But this is not the only reason for the problems that readers may have here. While the subject is itself difficult and beset with an extremely technical terminology, Heath's account of theoretical principles is much of the time exhausting and opaque to the point of unreadability. I can see no compelling or even interesting reason for the book's overall stylistic truculence: a text that surrenders English grammar for turgid parataxis, or constructions that read like literal translations from the French, rife with bad puns and appeals to the authority of etymology (an idealist-essentialist notion of language if ever there were one). These mannerisms are unfortunately characteristic of this kind of criticism; indeed, the unintentionally self-parodic effect of much of Heath's jargon offers just the material for an easy and fashionable dismissal of the whole enterprise. We do not even find the wit and high spirits with which some of the French deconstructionists conduct their polemic against readability, let alone the lucid elegance of a Barthes or Metz.

The complaint is not, I think, just fastidious and aesthetic, but bears upon a serious rhetorical error, compromising one of the main impulses of Heath's argument. We may regard a critical enterprise such as this to consist of three rhetorical stages: first, the framing of theoretical postulates, of a "matrix"—the almost exclusive concern of Metz's book. Second, the application of the specific analytical instance; Heath provides a number of intelligent examples (which derive as much from the methodological disciplines of Cambridge practical criticism as from anywhere else). Third, for the Marxist who will have no dealings with the Kantian realm of free artistic autonomy, the gesture beyond the text, the Utopian prescription. It is here that most of the problems of Heath's procedure (and of much Marxist criticism) come to the fore.

The Utopian imperative: the critic, having described the ideological bindings of actual film performance, must call for "new relations of film performance"—Goddard's aim "to make films *politically*" meaning not just a deconstruction (in itself, indulgence in a bourgeois-anarchistic "formal crisis of codes") but a reconstruction of the cinematic signifier. Transformation of the political signified alone is sentimentalism (Chapter 11); signifier relations themselves must be redefined. Heath's position must be extreme, by its theoretical terms, for if Suture and Narrative are the formal principles of ideology, then quite simply "there can be no radical narrative film" (p. 172). Local evictions of the

imaginary admit substitutes; as Heath points out, we quickly renarrativize, and thus naturalize, elements of "rupture" and "excess" in a film in order to "make sense of it." Two points: first, the total displacement of narrative and its imaginary that Heath seems to be proposing may likewise achieve no more in practice than the substitution of another imaginary, at a subtler remove. To read a text is to experience a series of displacements, no radical, once-and-for-all displacement; a new reality of the "text without ideology" seems the ultimate false consciousness. Second, more practically, Heath would have the ultimate refusal of intelligibility itself. This sounds bold, and is supported with appeals to Barthes' formula for *jouissance-through-boredom* (boredom frees the reader from the thrall of textual closure into the interminable signifier-play of his desire, etc.) (Barthes 1973). However, Heath lacks the playful irony with which Barthes (never himself boring) forwards this call. The calculated alienations of the new "structural-materialist film" Heath privileges may indeed dissipate the fiction of subject-identity, offer no false refuge from the real, but few viewers in the present or foreseeable future apart from an elite of Marxist intellectuals will want to savor boredom-as-freedom. Christian Metz subscribes to the old Aristotelian pleasure principle—he likes going to the movies—and he himself articulates Heath's problem, that of the possibility of effective political intervention across and against the extraordinary power of the filmic imaginary. Heath seems to set forth a puritanical refusal not only of the opiate pleasures of the system, but of the system itself. But how effective can any discourse be which seeks to remove itself from the always-compromised communal systems of discourse and meaning? The Marxist must respond to his own utilitarian principles. To privilege the unpleasurable and unintelligible, to duck out of discourse, is to award oneself peculiar and private aesthetic election. This country's foremost Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson, confronting the Utopian challenge, claims that the only possibility for optimism must reside within the collective, the renewal of discourse within discourse, the individual perspective somehow subsumed to a collective transcendence (see Jameson 1981). This of course begs all sorts of questions, but the alternative is to remain within the impossible circularity of the issue of "false consciousness." Heath's emphasis does not escape this; there is in the end something not-so-paradoxically both anarchistic and totalitarian about his apocalyptic rejection of narrative system itself, just as there is about his style and its informing assumption that one must belong to a hermeneutic elect in order to be able to read it (or even tolerate it). It seems to me that his principles commit him to an excessively deterministic view of the operations of a text, seeing its ideo-

logical hold as absolute and inescapable; conversely, he underestimates the polysemous subversiveness of the signifier, the presence in the text of not just one monolithic discourse, but many, whose contradictions and redundancies open the space of our limited but nonetheless viable "freedom."

It is a pity about the obstructive style, because the book offers, beyond these complaints, many intelligent and forceful indications for inquiry into the operations not only of cinema but of all textual institutions. Heath concludes, much as Metz does, with the call for a new historiography grounded in the analysis of social productions and relations; despite local suggestions, this is not realized, and I again suspect that a theoretically informed practical instance of such a historiography would be more convincing and stimulating than the theoretical formulations. But, after all, the book is entitled *Questions of Cinema*, and those that Heath raises deserve close attention.

Within their common area of address, these books suggest different discursive contexts: Metz's speaks comfortably from the mandarin throne of French criticism confident of its cultural centrality, while Heath's is more heterogeneous and uneasy, aware of its emarginated and contradictory status in a Britain where all voices are those of class strife. This may yet turn out to be its strength, given greater rhetorical control. At the moment, in response to these latter contradictions, I am left with a discouraging sense of the remoteness of these highly specialized and skillfully wrought productions even from the average university-educated filmgoer in Britain or America. Time will tell whether they are a genuine vanguard staking out inaccessible territory for future intellectual colonization, or a lost patrol in the wilderness of its own discourse.

Note

- 1 Eisenstein is perhaps insufficiently acknowledged as the pioneer of this kind of inquiry; his investigation of the psychological-affective base of cinematic signification through the montage principle is very close to the Metz/Heath enterprise.

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Svetlana Alpers. *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983. 273 pp. \$37.50.

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Suppose that in some unimaginable disaster the Italian and Dutch paintings of the National Gallery are mixed together. Your task is to separate them again into two groups. The obvious procedure would be to call Annunciations, Crucifixions, and Judgments of Solomon Italian, and genre scenes, still life works, and landscapes Dutch. Asked to justify this procedure, one could contrast the interests of an aristocratic Catholic and a bourgeois Protestant society. Depictions of flower groupings or young ladies receiving love letters are not suitable for altarpieces. For art historians, as Alpers explains in her introduction, this seemingly simple classification involves some value judgments. Histories of Italian art trace its developing naturalism and locate the texts it narrates. But Dutch seventeenth-century art doesn't progress toward naturalism, and it is an art of description. "Most . . . Dutch pictures are composed of subjects gross, vulgar, and filthy," William Collins wrote in 1817; and this view, Alpers points out, is also that of its champions, as when Fromentin praises it as "the portrait of Holland . . . faithful, exact, complete, life-like, without any adornment" (quoted in Haskell 1976: 205; Fromentin 1981:97). When the authors of the Pelican history refute this claim that Dutch art "is nothing but a mirror of reality" by reference to the Dutch naiveté and awe before reality, and to the formal and expressive qualities of their representations, we are unconvinced (Rosenberg et al. 1972:240; Fry 1927). If it seems unfair to thus judge Dutch art inferior merely because art historians have a hard time talking about it—suppose literary critics concluded that the greatest novels are those most readily analyzed—perhaps even the ways we speak of pictures bring out our anti-Dutch prejudices. A deep picture, we say, tells us more than we see just by scanning its surface; a merely attractive image is, literally, superficial.

Alpers's learned and highly ambitious book aims to change the rules of this game. Instead of applying the standards of an art of narration to Dutch art, let us seek novel criteria demonstrating how it is, on its own terms, fully the equal of Italian painting. Just as Saenredam, Metsu, and Vermeer are not painters doing poorly what the Italians do well, so her defense of them should not be measured by the standards of Panofsky's or Wölfflin's accounts of Italian art. Of course, no account, however novel, can change the