

*Jean-Louis Comolli*

**Technique and Ideology:  
Camera, Perspective, Depth  
of Field [Parts 3 and 4]**

EDITOR'S NOTE: What follows are two installments from a series by Jean-Louis Comolli on questions of technology, ideology, and historiography published intermittently in *Cahiers du cinéma* during 1971 and 1972. In installments which preceded the two included here, Comolli establishes his own approach through critiques of Jean-Patrick Lebel's arguments in *Cinéma et idéologie* (Paris: Ed. Sociales, 1971); of André Bazin; and of the critiques of Bazin made by Jean Mitry and by some of the theorists and critics whose work had recently appeared in the journal *Cinéthique*. (A translation of Comolli's first installment has been published in *Film Reader* [1977] no. 2.)

Against Lebel, Comolli attacks the idea that cinematic technology is ideologically neutral because the apparatus is based on scientific principles. From a consideration of the prehistory of cinema and its "origins" (a notion which he calls into question), Comolli argues that cinema, even in its technology, is part of the complex of determinations which makes up the social whole, and that it responds to economic and ideological demands. This is the broad view which he develops in his critiques of Bazin, Mitry, and the *Cinéthique* writers. The "natural" "realism" of the film image is in fact the result of codification processes. A key indicator of this purported "realism" of the image is the illusion of depth, so Comolli takes that as his privileged examples of a technique. As an important object of study, deep focus must be interrogated not as a "natural" tendency of

Published as "II. Profondeur de champ: la double scène (suite): (Notes pour une histoire matérialiste. . . suite)" in *Cahiers du cinéma* (August–September 1971), no. 231 pp. 42–49; and "La profondeur de champ 'primitive'" in *Cahiers du cinéma* (November 1971) no. 233, pp. 40–45. Reprinted and translation used by permission of the British Film Institute.

cinema, but as a symptom, both in the discourses of theoreticians and historians and in filmmaking practices. On the other hand, Mitry's limited critique of Bazin is said to miss the crucial function of the spectator, which is precisely to deny the otherness of the image that Mitry emphasizes, and thus to disavow certain of the differences between image and reality established by Mitry.

Comolli suggests that a materialist history of the cinema would require sensitivity to the complexity and diffuseness of determinations. It would require a new way of reading films, film theories, film histories—and film history. (His references are to the conceptualization of Louis Althusser on “symptomatic readings” in *Reading Capital* [Paris: Maspero, 1968; trans. London: New Left Books, 1970], and to the theoretical approach of Julia Kristeva, cited below.) Comolli calls for a historical work which refuses to postulate linear causality as its fundamental organizing principle; which constructs the theoretical status of its objects (such as “the” cinema or deep focus) rather than just taking them as givens; and which takes its objects of study in terms of their (potentially shifting) positions within systems of representation, or signifying practices—which means attention to the constitutive impregnation of cinema by codes that are not specifically cinematic. Such a materialist history would not, for example, study the “story” of deep focus—the who, when, and where of its supposed “first” uses and the line of uses which followed necessarily and solely from these; nor would it outline cinema's purported “progress” toward greater and greater technical and therefore referential perfection. Rather, a materialist history would study “the convergences and divergences, breaks and reinforcements which characterize the inscription of deep focus into this historical context,” a context which is never separable from the ideological requirements, contestations, and contradictions of the social whole.

### Part 3

#### Depth of Field: The Double Scene

##### (Notes Toward a Materialist History of the Cinema, Continued)

I will now try to apply along two main axes the general principles for the conditions of a materialist approach to the history of the cinema.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, what it is that drives all current “histories of the cinema” (all empiricist in method, and idealist in the concept of cinema which activates them and which they inscribe: as we shall see, what has been said of Bazin in fact applies as much to

Mitry as to Deslandes) to go on endlessly and systematically cataloguing the long series of "first times," that chain of "inaugurations" of technical devices and stylistic figures by this or that film. They adopt the empirical object "cinema" without troubling to construct its theory, and proceed to exhaust themselves in an obsessive re-marking of its proliferation of "births" (seen as automatic in the absence of theory); in other words, they seek to establish its "origin," which can only prove to be dispersed. This should of course seriously shake the very notion of an "origin," but these histories hasten to slide over and confine the damage by making the dispersal itself the justification for their basic eclecticism.<sup>2</sup>

The second axis along which I will test the notions put forward so far will proceed inversely. Its point of departure will be the theoretical implications of the object depth of field. It will be remembered that this study designated depth of field as one of the scenes for an operational analysis of the connections between cinematic technique and its economic and ideological determinations. On the one hand we will examine the historical inscription of deep focus, which means looking closely at the varied and uneven effects of the different (economic, ideological, and technological) factors which produce this inscription—its modes, curve, and pattern which explain why deep focus is used occasionally in some instances, systematically in others, why it is brought forward or repressed on the scene of filmic signifiers.

On the other hand, we will at the same time consider the "solutions" which idealist history and aesthetics (Bazin, Mitry) have contributed to the conflicts revealed by such an analysis. What we intend therefore is a rereading of the idealist discourse from the standpoint of the main area it represses—that complex of economic, political, and ideological determinants which shatter any notion of "the aesthetic evolution of the cinema" (any claim for complete autonomy for the aesthetic process). Since this is, in fact, the mainstay of idealist criticism, it is clear why it wants no part of such an argument.

On this basis we will bring into play the *specific* contradictions of the concept of signifying practice in its application to the cinema. This will be, notably, the unremitting division (antagonistic contradiction) between two categories of film. The first is the general mass of films which, whether "art" films or not, are held by idealist discourse on however frail a pretext to incarnate "the cinema" (the effect of "mass medium," and of the generation of "waves" of filmmaking is precisely what guarantees the eclecticism already mentioned). In the final analysis these are simply the endless modulations and repetitions of cinematic discourse as communication, representation, and univocal sense—whose exposure by theory is therefore essential. They are the innumerable realizations of the cinema as an ideological instrument, a vector and disseminator of ideological representations where the subject of ideology (the spectator of the spectacle) cannot fail to identify himself since what is involved is always the communication of "A Meaning ever present to itself in the presence of the Subject." (In fact, this

describes the way the system of "transparency" *functions*: denying the work of differences, work as difference, meaning as work, in order to postulate meaning as an [intersubjective] exchange: the sign as money.)

In the second category of films (or practices), on the other hand, the status of meaning is modified by the work in the signifier. In this sense they may be called films of *rupture* after the work of Julia Kristeva.<sup>3</sup> Kristeva has referred to this work in the signifier as "always a *surplus* which exceeds the laws of ordinary communication";<sup>4</sup> it also sets signifying processes in action on the "other scene of *signifiance*"<sup>5</sup>—that of the production of meaning (as opposed to the representation of A Meaning); and as work, it represents a break with "the ideology of signification" insofar as that "censors the problematic of work." In these terms the work in the signifier therefore constitutes that *text* from which the ideological inscription of those films can be reformulated and recast. Above all it can give rise to an *other cinema object*, one which would not always be assigned the same, sole—ideological—function (expressing, representing, specularizing, spectacularizing, changelessly distracting, tirelessly reconducting).<sup>6</sup> Instead, as a signifying practice, it would both be and reintegrate into ideology the "network of differences which characterize and/or combine with the mutations of different historical blocs."<sup>7</sup>

Constructing the theory of this new cinema object—the "cine-signifier"—would also mean putting a definitive end to the linear (literary) model of the "histories of the cinema." More precisely, it would mean "destroying the conceptual mechanism which installs historical linearity and reading in its place a *stratified history*; that is, a history characterized by discontinuous temporality, which is recursive, dialectical, and not reducible to a single meaning, but rather is made up of types of *signifying practices* whose plural series has neither origin nor end. Thus another history will be outlined, which underpins linear history; a recursively stratified history of *signifiances* where communicative language and its underlying ideology (sociological, historicist, or subjectivist) represent only its superficial facet. This is the role played by the text in all present-day society, required of it unconsciously, and prohibited or obstructed in *practice*."<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the difficulties of this work (and they are great) it is no longer possible to maintain the history and the theory of cinema in separate watertight compartments: the new cinema object displaces the classifications and orderings set up at various times by historians and aestheticians, and the action of displacement informs both the practice and the theory. The new cinema object defines itself within this displacement and it can be read in the recasting of the relations of the different signifying practices to each other and to the social whole. But the theory of the new cinema object, which in establishing itself gives the first impulse to this displacement, is also constantly produced, informed, and recast by it.

Thus, a little of this dialectic will be put into play in what follows, at the modest level of a number of film techniques where are produced, perhaps more readably than elsewhere, the conjunction and conflicts of economic pressures,

ideological obfuscations (masking/recuperation), scientific knowledge, "influences" of other signifying practices, relations of production, signifying work, the thrust of *signifiance*, which is never fully abolished even if it is repressed or "forbidden"—in short, cinematic technique as a double scene of practice and signifying.

### "For the First Time . . ."

The considerable frequency with which the *fixed syntagm* "for the first time" recurs in existing "histories of the cinema" offers itself as a symptom for a reading of these histories. Beyond the issues with which polemics between film "historians" are exclusively concerned—i.e., the accuracy of the facts and recollections they record, the number and detail of the references provided—this reading would also have to take into account the system by which these histories are written, the rhetoric and terminology which governs them, the ideas which program them and for which they are the scene.

The decisive operation in these histories seems inevitably to be the selection and review of the greatest possible number of technical, stylistic, and formal innovations, each of which is presented (and researched) as the initiator of a succession of aesthetic developments (the "progress" of a "language"). And the culmination of the process is the cinema practiced at the time that the given historian writes, when it is discovered in its final and *perfected* form.

In other words, by an effect of inversion and misrecognition proper to ideological inscription, the cinematic practice contemporary with the historian is seen to program, determine, and originate as veritable source the historian's research into the "sources" and "origins" of that practice. Thus he hypostasizes what is here and now as the "reality" of cinema and the truth of that practice; for, since it is contemporary to the historian, he is implicated in it, and his own practice is necessarily articulated with it. In the name of a temporary and particular film practice held illusorily as knowledge of the cinema object, the historian catalogues masses of signs of forerunners of this practice. This serves to *authenticate* the moment of a practice in which he himself is implicated, that is, to *legitimize* a particular *experience*. And thus (on the model of "In the beginning" of all religious and cultural myths of origins), he transports back to cinematic ancient times, its prehistory and early history, as many of the characteristic traits of today's practice as possible. By thus finding their origin (their foundation: their law), these are constituted in a chain with a beginning, a development, and an ending; in other words, with a *logic* and a history that are *autonomous*, marginal to the determinations of the social whole.

The cataloguing and multiplication of origins thus act as *proofs* of this autonomy: the necessary usage of the expression "for the first time" *guarantees* the cogency of all the "next times," and especially the features of the cinematic practice of the moment, the "this time": the "First" at the same time valorizes,

inscribes, comprehends, and bears all the rest. The eclecticism of contemporary cinema (the apparently equal status and "value" of its products, their "richness" and "diversity") is thereby condoned by a comparable eclecticism in its beginnings (there is no form which doesn't have its mold, its "original" somewhere in the beginnings of cinema), and this is all the more readily possible since the latter is a rigorous copy and retrospective projection of the former.

Thus it is indeed an ideological discourse about (notably) the ideological place of cinematographic technique which the fixed syntagm "for the first time" incessantly maintains.

A point already mentioned needs to be stressed here. In these articles we have systematically opposed two different historical approaches, and the radical distinction between them has to be kept in view, even though they both establish cinema's historical scene from its scene in the present. The first approach, criticized here, is characterized by its retrospective eclecticism. When faced with the mass of traits which together present themselves as constituting the "cinema," it is incapable of theorizing and sorting out principal contradictions from surface effects: it makes no distinction between those contradictions in film practice which are related to the contradictions of the social whole, the forces of production and the relations of production, and the secondary contradictions which come into play as derivation and occultation. It fails to separate the lines of force of the text from supplementary aesthetic effects. Instead, it unifies and brings together on the same level under the label "cinema" everything that empirically presents itself as such. The question of relevance in relation to this jumble of notations and signals is suppressed. The task is cataloguing these various manifestations and producing their "birth certificates" for history, making the mere historical record the condition as well as the justification for their present existence.

The historical scene is therefore only a double, the copy which conforms to the contemporary scene. This is not at all the case for the second approach outlined in "Notes for a materialist history of the cinema" (a previous installment in this series; *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 230, p. 57), as "eminently critical, i.e., recursive" and constituting "the past from the lines of force of the present." This approach would begin by exposing the principal contradictions of the present moment in cinematic practice to take up again and reactivate the cinema as (and upon) the scene of its principal determinations. This would be done by bringing to the forefront the forces which the effect/function of the first approach is to drown in the mass of films. The second approach therefore cannot be envisaged outside the continuous intervention of theory on the scene of history, whereby the latter ceases to be restricted to an accumulation of "historical data," but breaks up on several levels where the articulations, interactions, and contradictions of the processes of production are in play.

The opposite of this necessity to incorporate history and theory is seen in Mitry's work, with its academic division into *History of the Cinema* on the one hand, and *Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* on the other. Obviously these

two pendant texts can only function by reference to each other. But since what regulates these cross-references is never determined—i.e., the definition of the history-theory relationship—they establish themselves according to the principle of a crisscrossing volley between history and aesthetics. At each difficulty, the one throws back to the other the “ball” of present practice as explanation.

Symptomatic of this to-ing and fro-ing in the ideological series of “first times,” for example, is the difficulty Mitry has in settling the origin of the “first closeup.”

If what is meant by “closeup” is a simple enlargement effect, its use is as old as cinema itself. The so-called “big heads” which loomed up in the midst of a series of uniform long-shots had already appeared in the films of Méliès circa 1901, and the fire alarm which appears in *The Life of an American Fireman* is doubtless the first closeup of an object recorded on film. But the “big heads” whose sudden appearance provoked a surprise effect derived far more from the “animated portrait” than from cinematic expression. It is only with montage, as we have seen, that shots take on meaning in relation to each other [*sic; anything else would be astonishing—J.-L. C.*]. These shots, almost all of which were discovered, experimented with, and applied by Griffith in numerous little films made in 1909 and 1910, were only brought together, organized, and structured into a coherent whole from 1911 and 1912. To say therefore that Griffith was the first to use the closeup doesn't mean that the enlargement effect was not used before him, but that he was the first to make it a means of expression by raising it to the level of a *sign*. One would look in vain in any film—even those of Griffith before 1911—for closeups used other than for descriptive ends. The closeup as we know it [?] only made its appearance in 1913, notably in *Judith of Bethulia*.<sup>9</sup>

This passage alone raises a number of questions:

(1) What is the relevance of the hierarchy implied by Mitry between “big heads” provoking “a surprise effect,” closeups of objects, “closeups used for descriptive ends,” and finally “enlargement effects raised to the level of a *sign*”? Couldn't each of these empirical categories also cover the rest? What, for instance, prevents the “big heads” from both “provoking a surprise effect” and rising to the level of a “sign”?

(2) If the problem is deciding on the “first closeup,” why bring in criteria of “content” (i.e., the role of these closeups in the production of meaning) and oppose the simple “descriptive” closeups to those which are “expressive” (inasmuch as it would be difficult to argue that descriptive closeups—like that of the fire alarm—are totally devoid of dramatic effect, denoting without connoting).<sup>10</sup> Either the scale of the shot is important, or else, if its plastic and dramatic value is also important, mustn't one abandon the attempt to fix on “the first closeup”?

(3) What must we ultimately understand by “the closeup as we know it”? The least one can say is that “we” don't “know” a single variety, but a thousand, an infinite number, including of course the “big heads” which are still in use, and “shots used for descriptive ends.”

Mitry therefore has no basis for opposing with any pertinence the “simple

enlargement effect" to "a means of expression raised to the level of a sign," since the closeup-sign necessarily produces an "enlargement effect" (otherwise, no closeup) and all "enlargement effects" can also have the value of a "sign" and arise from an "expression." No basis, that is, other than the theoretical lack which makes him take a particular customary usage (the closeup "as we know it"), a certain "norm" at the time he was writing, as law and truth, because it constitutes the empirical mean for the films of the time—a mean which assures Griffith's aptitude as "experimenter" and his aesthetic rather than historical primacy. To pursue this particular instance further: the closeups of Hollywood stars no more "descend" from the closeups of Griffith's actors than they do from the "animated portraits" of Demeny (1891). We know they were due to the contractual conditions imposed by the star system: the number and kinds of closeups were prescribed even before shooting began, and before the film narrative was completely fleshed out.

No necessary equivalence links the closeups of 1913 to those of 1960 because the relevant element of opposition is not the parameter of enlargement in shots but the network of differences between the forces which determine two moments of film practice. These differences specifically preclude constituting "closeups" (or traveling shots, etc.) into an ahistorical chain and collapsing them all onto the same level. Founding thus the "closeup as we know it," Mitry effaces the scene of contradictions where the conditions of cinematographic *signifiante* are played out and erects instead a series of autonomous processes; these techniques, once "invented," systematized, and enthroned by some pioneer (whose practice for this very reason is not necessarily connected to that of later filmmakers), forever remain what they were on first appearance, available once and for all, usable universally and out of time—abstract molds whose nature, function, and meaning do not change (recognizable in this argument is the action of consensus which supports Lebel's technicians' discourse).

The necessary precedence of a theoretical definition of the closeup over the question of its first historical appearance is glaringly obvious here ("if one understands by 'closeup' . . . the closeup as we know it"). Unless we undertake this work of definition within the analysis of history itself, we will, like Mitry, remain imprisoned by the empirical notion of "closeup" which opens out into an intellectual flux: it never achieves the rigor of a concept because it claims to embrace and cover all closeups simply by describing their empirical existence in films already there, where each case is in fact necessarily different. Taking as a point of departure this extremely problematic—because extremely vast—"closeup as we know it" to establish its "first" inscription into history can only lead to the discovery of *more* than one—as many as one likes (in proportion to the initial grab bag): in fact, as many "as we know" empirically.

What Mitry's text demonstrates unwittingly (for to make it explicit would destroy his plan to establish the "first times") is that until a concept of the closeup has been constructed, there can be no "first" closeup since all closeups are in some sense "first";<sup>11</sup> Mitry's argument in fact makes plain the bankruptcy of the



very "notion" of closeup which sustains it. We are thus led to question this notion of closeup as it circulates in technical and critical discourse, there "by right," unquestioned, presented as a "unit of language," whereas no closeup is inscribed as such in film texts. Not only are all closeups inscribed as a network of signifiers, a complex system, but they are also held in signifying chains which comprehend, traverse, and structure them. For example, if when he opposes the "closeup as a simple enlargement effect" to the "closeup sign," Mitry means that Griffith's closeups have a more essential function in the production of meaning than they could have in the films of Méliès (which has yet to be demonstrated), the response would be that the process of production of meaning as a whole has quite a different status in Griffith, and that isolating the "notion" of closeup to bring into play not the parameter of enlargement but the textual differences leads to an aporia. For either the closeup is always a closeup, or else what constitutes the closeup is its insertion into a signifying process, in which case the closeup cannot be isolated in a relevant way, and its "notion" produces no knowledge of its status in the functioning of film. This procedure seems, in an unconsidered (but "natural") way, to deport the "notion" of closeup from the technical practice of film production, where it is an operational index, into that of film criticism and theory, where it acts as a *false abstraction*. Precisely because it is so convenient (so easily "naturalized" into the technical-critical language), does it not mask more than it reveals of the signifying work? By abstracting, for example, the "enlargement" scale<sup>12</sup> as a syntactical category of "cinematic language," does technical-critical discourse produce anything besides a formalist grid aimed at concealing, fixing, and finally ousting the problematic of the signifying production; that is, doesn't it carefully maintain a mystification around the mechanisms of this production which serves to preserve the autonomy (magical power) of technique?

From this angle we need to take up the whole of Mitry's text (no doubt the most exemplary, since it attempts and fails to formulate the aesthetics-history relationship) to study systematically the status of each of the basic terms of the technical discourse in the chain of "first times": "shots," "traveling shots," "long-shots," "decor," "montage" (instructive, for instance, is his ordering of the first films to establish a narrative continuity through montage), etc. The fact that technical terminology has at all costs to be stamped with its origin is an admission of its inadequacy in the field of criticism and theory in the form in which it has been institutionalized.<sup>13</sup>

In fact the fetishization of "the first time" (in addition to its ideological connotations: the cult of the exploit, of the unique; everything that bourgeois ideology attaches to origin and the original as a manifestation of primacy and purity, etc.) is aimed in the case of technical devices at keeping them apart from the forces which determine them, that is, the processes in which they are held; they can therefore be presented in their totality and for all time as a chronological and logical linear succession, since in each case a first appearance can be marked *outside* any problematic of signifying production (i.e., the ideologies and the

economies where this production is articulated) and outside the cultural codes and the signifying system which governed its status in the particular film in which it emerged "for the first time." (In other words emergence [*émergence*] = *émargement*—placing in the margin a signature which appropriates and reduces to itself the whole signifying process. To take an example from Mitry: "*Mary Jane's Mishap* [G. A. Smith, 1902]: for the first time, the idea of continuity in the cinema.") And clearly Lebel (knowingly or not) rests his claim for technique as autonomous and always open to but empty of signifying on the separation which the Histories and the Aesthetics of the cinema make between technical and signifying processes.

As soon as one interprets a technical process "for its own sake" (i.e., "the first traveling shot in the history of the cinema") by cutting it off from the signifying practice where it is not just a factor but an *effect* (i.e., not just a "form" which "takes on" or "gives" a meaning, but itself already a meaning, a signifier activated as a signified on the other scene of film, its outside: history, economy, ideology)—it becomes an ahistorical empirical object. With a few minor adjustments (technical perfecting) it can wander from film to film, always already there and always identical to itself ("a closeup of the boss and a closeup of the worker are both a closeup"). It has this possibility in spite of and in order to *mask* the system of differences into which it is necessarily inscribed, including the contradictions between one fiction and another, one practice and another, as well as the contradictions of interests and ideologies with which the cinema is practiced and whose positive and negative marks it bears. On this "common basis" of historical, critical, and aesthetic discourses a technical scene is erected which dominates the scene of *significance*—since a closeup from *Jeanne d'Arc* and a closeup from *Battleship Potemkin* both refer back to the "first close-up in cinema." In other words, the discourse which proclaims technique as always open to but empty of signifying and ideologically "neutral" itself began by disassociating technique from the signifying production. *Formalist* from the beginning, it can not fail to find in its path anything besides "formal" techniques, "neutral" and "universal" forms.

## Part 4

### "Primitive" Depth of Field

In the case of "deep focus"<sup>14</sup>—as with the "closeup" (or any other term from the practice and metalanguage of technique)—it is not possible to postulate a continuous chain of connections running through the history of the cinema. And the history of "deep focus," like that of the "closeup," cannot be constructed without bringing into play a system of determinations which *are not exclusively*

*technical*. They are rather economic and ideological, and as such they break down the boundaries of the specifically cinematic field, extending and therefore transforming it with a series of additional areas; they bring the field of cinema to bear on other scenes and integrate these other scenes into that of the cinema. They break apart the fiction of an autonomous history of the cinema—that is, of “styles and techniques.” They produce the complex relationships which link the field and history of the cinema to other fields and other histories.

In the particular case of deep focus, therefore, an analysis of these economic and ideological determinations will allow us to assess the way that codes which are themselves not specifically cinematic (in this case pictorial, theatrical, and photographic), regulate the functions—i.e., *meanings*—assumed by deep focus in the process of production of meanings in film; and to assess the economic/ideological forces which bring pressure to bear for or against the effects of this regulation and these codes. Historian-aestheticians like Mitry and theoreticians like Bazin succumbed to the attractions of the view which sees the film text and the evolution of film language as determined by technical progress (the gradual development and improvement of the means). That is, they fell prey to the idea of a “treasure house” of technique which filmmakers could draw on “freely,” according to the stylistic effects they were after; or of the technical processes as a “reserve” held somewhere independent of systems of meaning (histories, codes, ideologies), and “ready” to intervene in signifying production. To succumb to such a view they had to see the technical system in its entirety as so “natural” and so “self-generating” that the question of its utility (what is it used for?) was completely obscured by that of its utilization (how is it used?). The naturalization of the metalanguage of technique into the metalanguage of criticism and the automatic and unreasoned identification of technical devices and their actions with the “figures” of “film language” (or what Christian Metz has more rigorously called “the minimal units of signification specific to cinematic codes”)<sup>15</sup> is precisely what constitutes the immediate problem for a materialist theory of the cinema which is not content with “the facts,” nor with remaining at the level of empiricism.

A semiology of cinematographic “figures” which would fail to question the applicability of terms “consecrated by use” in identifying these “figures” also fails to deconstruct the strata of history, ideology, and code in these “terms/figures.” Such a semiology, in short, would give credence to the notion that “cinematographic language” is but one with the metalanguage of technique, the latter itself considered homologous to the metalanguage of criticism. These failures would mean missing the distinct specificity of the three levels, and the play of their gaps and contradictions. This is the direction which Christian Metz has taken in his latest work, and Pascal Bonitzer has also initiated such a deconstruction.<sup>16</sup> I also intend to intervene in a more detailed way on this problem and to comment on some of Metz’s analyses in the third part of this article (in addition to my preceding chapter on “first times”). For it seems clear

that what anchors the idea of technique as neutral (i.e., as a "pool") is the "naturalized" and unthought absorption of "cinematic language" into the metalanguage of technique, and of the latter into the metalanguage of criticism. (This idea is still very dominant today, and Lebel's book seems intent on prolonging that dominance.) The technical ideology insists on setting technical practice apart from the systems of meaning, presenting it instead as the cause producing effects of meaning in a film text, and not as itself produced, itself an effect of meaning in the signifying systems, histories, and ideologies which determine it. This technical ideology in my view draws its strength of conviction from the (distant) bearing of "science" on the technical practices that produce film. For criticism, this "science" has guaranteed the intrinsic validity of these practices and favored the unquestioned and unmodified importation of their basic terms into the metalanguage of criticism.

It is indeed about "strength of conviction" and "naturalness"—and, a corollary, about the blind spots of theoreticians—that we have to speak. Mitry, for example, raises the fact that deep focus—used almost continuously in the early years of the cinema—disappeared from the scene of film signifiers for some twenty years (with a few particular exceptions, namely certain of Renoir's films), but offers only strictly technical motivations for its shelving. Mitry thus installs technique as the deciding factor, establishing a closed and autonomous circuit where the fluctuations of technique would only be determined by other fluctuations of technique. We, on the other hand, will study the specific historical nature of deep focus as the scene of determinations which are not exclusively technical—that is, a scene of technical determinations themselves overdetermined economically and ideologically. This will give us a measure of the relative status of technical practice in the context of the other practices which articulate it; we will be able to look at the way the latter determine technical practice, thereby inscribing it into a system of meanings in which technical practice itself is made to signify. At the same time we will be able to formulate theoretically the *work* of the technical device deep focus, i.e., the *relationship*—in a particular film text or body of films—between the signifying function of deep focus and the codified signified which it inscribes there as part of, and in addition to, its signifying function: this relationship can be one of doubling or of contradiction.

From the very first films produced, the cinematic image was "naturally" a deep focus image. The majority of the films of Lumière and his cameramen (cf. *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare*) demonstrate deep focus as a constituent element of the image. Mitry provides a number of other examples, including *Attack on a Chinese Mission* (Williamson, 1900) which I cite here because it also takes its place in Mitry's chain of "first times" and recalls how Mitry is constrained by his system to introduce other than purely technical criteria into his genealogy of technical innovations: "Because he was filming in natural surroundings, Williamson, liberated from the constraints of the studio and the scenic conditions

it imposed, was able to make his actors move freely. . . . They not only moved laterally in the frame, but also through depth. In *Attack on a Chinese Mission* the officer who arrives at the end of the garden to sweep a girl into his saddle, leaps straight at the spectator. We have already seen this effect produced by Lumière in *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare*, but there it was a question of *documentary filming, real movement shot by the cameraman, not a movement specifically composed for the camera*" (my emphasis).<sup>17</sup>

In fact, it's most often in exterior filming that the field achieves depth in this period. The reason is indisputably of a technical order: the lenses used before 1915 were, Mitry stresses, "uniquely f35 and f50"<sup>18</sup>—"medium" focal lengths which had to be stopped down in order to produce an image in depth, and therefore needed a great deal of light, more readily and economically obtainable outside than in the studio.

What we have to ask ourselves, therefore, is precisely why only these "medium" focal lengths were used during the first twenty years of cinema. I see no more pertinent reason than the fact that they restored the spatial relationships which corresponded to "normal vision" and that they therefore played their role in the production of the impression of reality to which the cinematograph owed its success. These lenses themselves were thus dictated by the codes of analogy and realism (other codes corresponding to other social demands would have produced other types of lenses). The depth of field which they allowed was thus also what authorized them, was the basis for their utilization and existence. It wasn't therefore just a supplementary effect whose use could be passed up as a matter of indifference. On the contrary, it was what *had* to be obtained, and it had been necessary to strive for its production. The ideological instrument cinema was made as a gamble and staked itself completely on the desire to identify, duplicate, and recognize "life" in visual forms, that is, on a relationship of identity between the cinematic image and "life itself." (Cf. the fantastic efforts made for decades by hundreds of inventors in quest of "total cinema"—the complete illusion and duplication of life, including sound, color, relief, etc.)

The ideological instrument cinema couldn't therefore have neglected the production of effects of relief and depth and failed to put into operation the patented technique which produced them. These effects strive to integrate into the image a vanishing perspective on the one hand, and, on the other, the movement of people and things along retreating lines (e.g., the train at La Ciotat station). (And the latter effect is one which photography, and painting *a fortiori*, could not provide, which is why the most perfect *trompe l'oeil*, meticulously constructed according to the laws of perspective, is, as Paulhan observed,<sup>19</sup> incapable of deceiving the eye.) The two effects are related: for characters to be able to move "perpendicularly" on the screen requires their being reached by light, requires depth and stratified planes—in short the code of artificial perspective. Furthermore, often in studio filming, where space was relatively tight and lighting

inadequate, background was in fact provided by *trompe l'oeil* canvasses which, while they couldn't enable the movement of people in depth, did on the other hand show perspective.

We know what perspective brought with it, and therefore what deep focus brought into the film image as its constituent codes: namely, the pictorial and theatrical codes of classic Western representation. Méliès, that specialist in "illusion" and the studio film, as early as 1897 characterized his "studio" in Montreuil as "in a word, the combination of a giant photographic workshop and a theater stage."<sup>20</sup> And no more exact indication is needed of the double background on which the cinematic image emerged—not fortuitously, but explicitly and deliberately. Deep focus is more than just the mark of the primitive cinematic image's submission to the codes of representation and the histories and ideologies which necessarily determine and operate these codes (and Lebel can't eliminate the fact that these histories and ideologies are caught in the rise and domination of the capitalist bourgeoisie and its ideology). In more general terms, it is a sign that the ideological instrument cinema is itself produced within these codes and by these systems of representation, completing, perfecting, and surpassing them. There is nothing accidental or specifically technical in the fact that the cinematic image claims depth from the first; not only does depth dictate and inform the image, but the possibility of its restoration dictates the optical instruments which produce the image. Contrary to what the technicians seem to believe, the restoration of movement and depth are not the effects of the camera, but the camera is the effect—the solution—to the problem of their restoration.

If depth of field is thus one of the principle determining factors regulating the cinematic image (and the apparatus), it is astonishing that its almost total eclipse for fifteen to twenty years hasn't presented more of a problem for the historian-aestheticians who, like Mitry and Bazin, draw attention to this fact. The former, as we shall see, limits the analysis of the problem to purely technical difficulties, though in other parts of his *Aesthetics* he nevertheless stresses the perspective-movement link in the production of a third dimension in the cinema. This presents no problem to Mitry precisely because for him all the technical processes are equal in right and in history, equivalent to and substitutable for each other without any consequences except those reflected in the effects of meaning which the filmmaker seeks to produce. The "freedom to choose" from this panoply of technical processes which he postulates for the contemporary filmmaker (the filmmaker out of time) is extended metonymically to those processes themselves, whose essence is thus the ability to be freely chosen—the sole reservation being the technically impossible. In other words, we have a series of more or less interchangeable accessories of more or less recent date whose "fashion" may or may not catch on. But deep focus was not "modish" in 1896—it was one of the credibility factors in the film image (like, even if not quite for the same reason, the faithful reproduction of movements and figurative analogy). And in order to account for the effacement of deep focus we need to consider not just the

"delays" in the development of techniques, but the transformation of the conditions of this credibility—the displacement of the codes of cinematic verisimilitude, the levels of fictional logic (narrative codes), psychological verisimilitude, and the impression of homogeneity and continuity (the consistent space-time relations of classical drama). For the technical "delays" are not accidental, they are themselves involved in and effects of this displacement or replacement of codes.

It would seem no less surprising (at least if one remains at the level of technical causes) that a process which reigned "naturally" over the greater part of films shot between 1895 and 1925<sup>21</sup> could disappear or fall into disuse for so long without filmmakers (apart from a few, including Renoir) showing the slightest concern. "Primitive" deep focus had been "given" to them in combination with the film image (at least in exterior shooting). It therefore presented no problem (unless one should want to annul it, but that would imply some reflection on its effects, an understanding of its code, and as far as I know, no signs of this manifested themselves during the period in question), and we could argue that the codes it inscribes had been "internalized" by filmmakers and spectators alike. It was not just that the film image seemed to tend "spontaneously" and naturally toward depth. Many filmmakers played its game and worked to reinforce its effect through a "mise-en-scène in depth." Apart from Williamson, Mitry cites Stroheim, Feuillade's *Fantomas* (1913), and Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916). One could add at least Stiller, Lubitsch, and Lang. What reversal took place to enable Brunius to write in 1936:

In summer 1936 I was working with Jean Renoir on the preparations for the filming of his *A Day in the Country* and we decided that scenes could be developed between people more than ten metres or so from each other in depth. But it was only with the greatest difficulty that we were able to procure old lenses, considered fossils—a few Zeiss and a 3.5 Bosch and Lomb. . . .<sup>22</sup>

This is Mitry's explanation:

One might ask oneself why, with rare exceptions (notably Stroheim), "depth" was abandoned between 1925 and 1940 in favor of intensive fragmentation. Some attribute it to fashion, others<sup>23</sup> to the influence of the Soviet cinema. While neither are entirely wrong, these are not the reasons, nor are they connected with the almost exclusive use of lenses with large apertures. Or, more exactly, the use of large apertures was itself the consequence of something else, since to get depth one only had to stop down more. But to get equivalent photographic quality, more light was needed. Nothing was simpler before 1925: the use of orthochromatic film permitted lighting with arc lamps, whose capacity for illumination was considerable; their number and power could just be increased. But beginning in 1925 panchromatic film came into general use and upset the situation altogether. Panchromatic film was sensitive to red and to all visible light (as the name indicates), but unevenly so, and this meant that arc lamps, whose spectrum tended towards violet and coincided precisely with the least sensitive area of the film, could no longer be used. Incandescent lighting was therefore resorted to. But these lamps were

not powerful enough, and, on the other hand, the first panchromatic emulsions were far less sensitive than existing emulsions. Consequently, in order for there to be adequate light, one had to "open up" the lens more rather than stop it down. Hence, the utilization of lenses with large apertures (and the consequent loss of depth); hence, the "narrowing" of the fields; and hence, the necessarily greater fragmentation. That this became a method of work normalized by routine, a mode rather than "modish," is undoubtedly true, but his so-called "cause" was never more than a consequence. A minimum of technical knowledge would have saved our theoreticians [the reference, no doubt, is to Bazin] a lot of unnecessary effort.<sup>24</sup>

A fine example of the technicist discourse (the final statement must have provoked laughter in the studios); the least of its weaknesses is that it resolves one difficulty by substituting *several others*.

First, the technical difficulties: it's worth pausing over these for a moment (and Mitry lists them for us), since the retracing of the (endless) chain of "technical causes" which pass the responsibility back from one to another reveals a number of *nontechnical* determinants—which it is precisely the function of this criss-crossing of "technical causes" to mask. Mitry assures us that everything stems from the "general acceptance of panchromatic film in the years after 1925." Perhaps. But to produce this as a weighty piece of evidence and immediately slide to the inadaptability of the system of lighting to the spectrum of this emulsion is exactly *not to say* what necessity is implied in this "general acceptance," what (new) functions the new film stock came to fulfill that the old one could not. It is to conjure away the question of what demanded the replacement of an emulsion in universal use, and which (if we take Mitry's word for it) was not all that mediocre, by another which, again according to Mitry, was at the outset far from its equal.

Now as far as we know, it isn't in the logic of technique, nor in the logic of the film industry (already highly structured and well-equipped in 1925) to adopt (or impose) a new product which in its early stages poses more problems than the old and therefore implies the expense of adaptation (modification of systems of lighting, lenses, etc.) *without finding something to its advantage and profit somewhere*.

And the first of these advantages is that the panchromatic film is *more sensitive* than orthochromatic, since as Mitry himself points out, even if the consequences are not followed up in his work—it is, "as its name indicates . . . sensitive to all visible light," while orthochromatic film is only sensitive to the radiations of blue and violet.

The *Dictionnaire du Cinéma*<sup>25</sup> describes the gain:

with orthochromatic film the various tones composing a face were unevenly transcribed into black and white. To compensate for this, actors were made up in blue and ochre. . . . In 1927 the first panchromatic emulsions were launched on the film market and the range of sensitivity was considerably enlarged. Makeup returned to almost normal colors.



The image obtained in black and white was called panchromatic, i.e., it reproduced the intensity of the normal tones within a considerably extended range of gray, black, and white.

It is not just a question of a gain in the sensitivity of the film stock, but a gain in the *faithfulness* "to natural colors"—a *gain in realism*. The film image refined and perfected its "rendering," and entered into renewed competition with the quality of the photographic image which had been using panchromatic emulsion for a long time. The reason for this "technical advance" is not purely technical (but ideological); it is not so much the greater sensitivity to light which counts as the ability "to make things more real." The hard and contrasted image of the early cinema no longer satisfied the codes of photographic realism which had been transformed and refined by the growth of photography. My view is that in the production of "realistic effects," the importance of depth (perspective) lessened with the extension of the range of tones and colors. But this is not all.

We can agree with Mitry that during the few (two or three) years of transition from orthochromatic to panchromatic film, the (bad because unadapted) conditions for the use of the new emulsion prevented a full exploitation of its greater sensitivity. But this doubly affects Mitry's argument.

First, because this necessary exploratory period was only very provisional (otherwise it would have compromised the industry itself); panchromatic film was soon perfected (in 1931 Kodak launched the supersensitive Eastman color); and an antidote was found to the arc lamp's tendency toward violet (the addition of salts—fluorides of calcium, barium, and chromium—to the carbons). One wouldn't think that a difficulty as ephemeral and as soluble as this could have seriously prohibited work with deep focus or "broken the habit of its use." One might suppose that an industry capable of shedding its skin (not just from orthochromatic to panchromatic, but from silent to sound) and of overcoming the inconveniences of these transformations could also, had it wished—i.e., if the demand had existed and exerted a pressure—obtain both a panchromatic image and deep focus without too much difficulty (the one only temporarily excluding the other). While it had been really necessary to change the emulsion, apparently no pressure was exerted to preserve deep focus. The fault in Mitry's argument (and the sense in which it is technicist) is that it explains technical transformations through other technical transformations, never for a moment considering that these transformations do not come about "freely," that they bring into play economic forces and forces of work, in short, economically and socially programed demands. There is no "technical heaven" where one method is exchangeable for another.

Second, Mitry's argument is affected because the argument limits itself according to the requirements of its cause to studio filming alone (where, of course, the power of the lamps and the sensitivity of the film is determining), "forgetting" that filmmakers went out to shoot on location in the years imme-

diately after 1925, as they did later on. Here, all the technical difficulties ceased (panchromatic film was, moreover, more sensitive than orthochromatic), and deep focus, which was given from the start, could not therefore have posed a problem. Yet from this point until *Citizen Kane*, when it was seen again, it was generally reduced to the status of an additional "décor" effect in the landscapes of westerns and adventure films—in other words to being a *code* of the landscape in long-shot, the very code of filmed "nature" itself. One can go further: difficult to avoid, depth of field was on the whole not exploited and remained residual. It is this "dis-affectation," which was not always linked to a material impossibility, that must be interrogated.

In fact, in classical Hollywood cinema this residual decorative status belongs not so much to "natural" depth of field as to landscape, to nature itself. The dominance of studio filming (tied to practico-economic reasons, but also historical ones—the heritage of silent film—and ideological ones—concern for "technical perfection"), even for the majority of "exterior scenes," codified the representation of nature in genre cinema. The role of landscape was reduced to that of 'décor'—the decorative background, the painted canvas inherited from the theater and convenient for the cutting-up/assemblage operations<sup>26</sup> of the psychological dramas which the many silent films had brought to the screen (even if only as burlesques, as in *Our Hospitality* and most of Keaton, and the films of Lloyd and Langdon). To send a second crew to get some of the Grand Canyon's "sights" was to confirm the "truth" of the painted canvasses by duplicating the code, pictorializing natural landscapes in "decor-fashion." The determination absent from Mitry's discourse is that of the ideology of studio shooting, of the (interior/exterior) representation of space it produced.

## Notes

1. See *Cahiers du cinéma*, nos. 229 (May 1971) and 230 (July 1971) for the first two parts of this text.

2. It will be observed that what happened for the "prehistory" of the cinema, the period of its invention, happens again for its "history" proper. We saw, in fact ("Birth = *différance*," *Cahiers du cinéma* (May 1971), no. 229, p. 9) how the quest for (the myth of) an origin was shattered by its encounter with the multiplicity of "inaugural inventions," and how it was exhausted in an attempt to establish the numerous acts of a dispersed production, irreducible to *single* logic, into a single causal chain (a progression). The histories of the cinema *would like* to find their object had an *origin* and a *unity*, in fact that it conformed to their concern for autonomy and linearity. Instead they find it dispersed, contradictory, never completely there; they refuse to analyze this birth and this history as *différance* and *différance* and strive pathetically through their discourse to patch up the breaches which specifically preclude *that* discourse; they make themselves the scene of contradictions which explode all possibility of a single scene of operation. That is, their discourse produces a "dream" object: "the invention of the cinema" or "the cinema," the absence of which object they imperturbably deny and about which they imperturbably comment. It is therefore the method which needs to be changed. The complexity of determinations and the

multiplicity of scenes where production is in play, whether this be technical, "aesthetic," or signifying production, can only be thought through the Marxist science of history.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: A comment on a term used here might be helpful for understanding Comolli's project. *Différance* is a neologism developed by Jacques Derrida. The French verb *différer* means both to differ and to defer. *Différance* is an invented noun form marking the combination of the two senses in a single word. This term is part of a complex philosophical argument which includes the notion that a neologism is necessary to point toward—though it can never adequately name or signify—the principle underlying the differentiated structure of language as well as that which drives language and knowledge toward an impression of adequacy or "presence."

Here we may say very briefly that, for Derrida, something which manifests a meaning or identity can never be fully present in its manifestation; it is always mediated. Hence, any manifestation or experience is always *different* from what it "professes" to be, and an experience of its full presence is "always already" *deferred*. As Derrida's translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts it, "*différance*—being the structure (a structure never quite there, never by us perceived, itself deferred and different) of our psyche—is also the structure of 'presence,' a term itself under erasure. For *différance*, producing the differential structure of our hold on 'presence,' never produces presence as such."

Comolli mobilizes Derrida's term as part of his critique of film scholars who, explicitly or implicitly, see the historian's task as devising an account of "firsts." For example, Comolli attacks the illusion that if one can name the first time cinema appeared, one has focused on the generative identity of cinema itself. Comolli wishes to stress the discursive and differential character both of the historian's task and of historical "material" itself. Instead of assuming a punctual, unified source of all cinema history ("the" "birth" of cinema), Comolli argues for the dispersed quality of historical phenomena and events. In previous installments, Comolli argued that if one searches for the birth of cinema, one will continually find side paths, a complex of events, factors, and determinations not reducible to a single, unified origin. Hence, for the historian the birth of cinema should be constantly found in difference and as deferred; therefore "birth = *différance*."

Derrida's essay "Différance" is in his *Speech and Phenomena, and other essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). See the translator's preface in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), *passim* and pp. xliii–xliv.]

3. See Julia Kristeva, *Sémiotikè: Recherches pour une Sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969); "Littérature, Sémiotique, Marxisme," interview with Christine Glucksmann and Jean Peytard, *Nouvelle Critique* (November 1970), no. 38; and "Pratique analytique, pratique révolutionnaire," *Cinétique* (1971), no. 9–10.

4. Kristeva, *Sémiotikè*, p. 16.

5. [*Signifiance* is a special term introduced by Julia Kristeva. It is equivalent neither to signifier (*signifiant*) nor signified (*signifié*) nor significance. Kristeva explains *signifiance* is a force subtending all signification, but which is exploited especially by modernist texts. As Comolli indicates, these underlying processes of signification are what produce the possibility of meaning. Therefore, in any instance of signification the existence of *signifiance* may be more heavily or less heavily marked (which can serve as an account of the relations between classical and modernist textuality).

But if *signifiance* is the underlying processes which enable meaning, this is precisely why it is in some sense other than and outside meaning. In Kristeva, it has a number of associations: with *work* on the signifier (rather than deemphasizing the characteristics of the signifier in order to stress the signified/meaning), with textual excess, with psychoanalytic conceptualization of the drives and the unconscious. It designates a certain "alterity," something beyond meaning in the very processes that produce "communication." Comolli's use of the concept of *signifiance* allies itself with his use of the concept of *différance*: they both function in his argument to signal a resistance to any quick unification of history or films around meaning ("the" meaning of history,

or films taken solely from the perspective of their "meanings"); and both terms support a dialectic between meaning and/or signifying system on the one hand, and the nonspeakable process and forces underlying discursive "surfaces" that produce those surfaces on the other.

Since *signifiante* both is necessary to "ordinary communication," and is there repressed, it can provide the basis for kinds of "countersignification," where its existence would be figured. Furthermore, as Comolli will argue, one can construct a history of *signifiants*—the various modes of repressing *signifiante* and/or figuring and exploiting it at different times and places.

Comolli's reference is to Kristeva's essay "La Texte et sa science" in her collection *Sémiotikè*. In that essay, pp. 8–12 provide a general, schematic introduction to the concept of *signifiante* on which this note has drawn.—ED.]

6. "The dialectical distinction signifier/ideology is all the more important when the problem is constructing the theory of a concrete signifying practice—for example, the cinema. Substituting ideology for the signifier is in this case not just a theoretical error; it leads to a blockage of the *work* that is properly cinematic, replacing it with discourses on its ideological *function*." Kristeva, "Pratique analytique, pratique révolutionnaire," p. 72. This observation, which is published in *Cinéthique* nos. 9–10, seems also to be aimed at *Cinéthique* 9–10 where the flattening of the signifier under ideology takes the form of law. A reading of our editorial statement "Cinéma/idéologie/critique," in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 216, p. 13b, will show that our position does not date from today; the paragraph referred to also situates "films of rupture."

[This editorial, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," was translated in *Screen* (1971) vol. 12, no. 1 and reprinted in John Ellis, ed., *Screen Reader 1* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1977)—TRANS.]

7. Kristeva, *Sémiotikè* p. 11.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

9. J. Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*, 2 vols. Paris: (Ed. Universitaires, 1963 and 1965), 1:162, 163.

[At the time Comolli's series appeared, only the first two volumes of Jean Mitry's *Histoire du cinéma: Art et industrie* (Paris: Ed. Universitaires, 1967 and 1969) had been completed. Comolli's remarks on Mitry's *Histoire* seem to be based on volume 1 (subtitled 1895–1914).—ED.]

10. Which Mitry doesn't fail to observe elsewhere, in passages of both the *Aesthetic* and the *History*: "for the first time a closeup (showing the fire alarm) took on dramatic meaning. This was no longer the simple enlargement of a detail, but the enhancement of an object on which the resolution of the drama depended" (Mitry, *Esthétique*, 1:274). This formula is repeated almost word for word in his *Histoire*, 1:235: "The closeup of the fire alarm, although isolated, is no longer a simple enlargement of a detail, but the enhancement of an object on which the resolution of the drama depends." This kind of contradiction between the two observations quoted and the passage analyzed above is not to be read as an "error" but as the logic of the system: to meet demands of a new "first time," each new "first closeup" (Griffith's, for example) relegates the preceding one to a lower rank.

11. Thus in his *History*, Mitry is constantly forced by his system to name ever-new particularizations of the "first closeup." For example: "Smith was also the first to combine the effects of lighting with his closeups" (*Histoire*, 1:227).

12. See on this point Pascal Bonitzer, "Realité de la dénotation," *Cahiers du cinéma* (May 1971), no. 229, pp. 39–41, esp. note 1.

13. In addition to what has been said on the "closeup," we will limit ourselves to a relatively simple example of the "first traveling shot," leaving open to later work the important problematic of the "first montage." We read in Mitry's *Histoire*, 1:113:

... Promio, profiting from a stay in Italy, had the idea of mounting his camera on a gondola. The viewpoint was "fixed" as always until 1909, but the displacement of the gondola recorded wide panoramic views such that *The Grand Canal of Venice* (1897) was the first "traveling" shot ever realized. Proud of his discovery,

Promio then fixed his camera on a variety of moving objects such as a train carriage, the bridge of a liner, and the Mont Blanc chair lift.

A response to which comes in the *Histoire* (1:151):

The *traveling shot* can be understood in a variety of ways. It may be a question of filming in movement, i.e., recording a landscape from a moving train, a vehicle, a chair lift, etc., where the camera remains stationary and moves with the moving object on which it is situated [?]. This kind of "traveling shot" is as old as the cinema itself (*The Grand Canal of Venice*, filmed by Promio in 1899 [sic]). What is understood more generally by this term is the "dollying" of the camera on a platform mounted on rails or on wheels. The camera thus advances in concert with, for example, two people walking along a road, but with a movement independent of them. That is, it can either precede them and allow itself to be overtaken, so as to show them at closer range, or inversely it can follow and gain on them. Or again, it can follow them laterally. This traveling shot according with the displacement of actors was used for the first time by Griffith in 1909. The closed-circuit traveling shot [?] in a fixed group of people, where the camera seizes on the actions of some of the characters of the drama or "figures" the displacement of any of them, is much more recent. . . . It was used for the first time in 1925 by Murnau in *The Last Laugh*.

But on 1:407 of the *Histoire* we already have this contradictory "precision":

In *The Massacre* (Griffith, 1912), for the first ever, large-scale *descriptive* [?] traveling shots, following characters, situating locations, presenting events (with a camera mounted on a dolly three years before Patrone's famous "carello").

The height of confusion is reached in Mitry's note to this last passage.

In his *Histoire général du cinéma* (Paris Denoël, vol. 3, p. 83), G. Sadoul contests the originality of these traveling shots: "It's worth recalling," he notes at the bottom of the page, "that the first examples we know of traveling shots predate *The Massacre* by more than ten years." We would like to know what traveling shots he has in mind. Obviously he is thinking of *The Grand Canal of Venice*. But are these really travelling shots? . . . A fixed shot from a moving element—train, car, etc.—records only the displacement of the landscape and is not properly speaking a traveling shot, any more than is the dollying forward of the camera toward a black background in *L'Homme à la tête de Caoutchouc* (Méliès, 1902), which aimed not at bringing the head *closer*, but at its *enlargement*. Apart from these examples and their analogies (*The Great Train Robbery*, etc.), there was no traveling shot in any film before 1912, the first having been produced as we said by Griffith in *The Sands of Dee* (1912).

Without dwelling on the contradictions between the dates given (ludicrous nevertheless for a historian who claims to be settling "first times": does the "descriptive traveling shot following the characters" date from 1909 or did it appear "for the first time in the world" in 1912?), let's look at those which bear on the definition of the very processes of the "traveling shot." There is cause for astonishment in the radical distinction which Mitry makes between the "fixed camera mounted on a moving element," and the camera "dollyed" on "a platform mounted on rails or on wheels": of course the moving object supporting the camera is not of the same order, but in both cases the latter is displaced in the same way and the shot produced by this displacement is of the same type, whether the displacement is that of a gondola, a train, a dolly, etc. Whatever the mobile support which carries it, the camera is not "fixed," and the shot which it records is defined as being in movement. The concern for technical precision which found this distinction (train/dolly) cannot itself guarantee the slightest technical and/or stylistic difference between the takes effected by one or the other means, both of which are mobile in any case. Thus, in this opposition Mitry is putting determinants other than the specifically technical ones into operation: the fact, for example, that in *The Grand Canal* there is neither the fiction nor the characters which are in play in the films of Griffith. Once again (see above on the closeup) the relevant criteria which decide technical primacy are not themselves technical, which simultaneously manifests both the conceptual inadequacy of technical terms and the dependence of technical processes on the signifying chains and on the narrative codes in which they take part. Note

again how specious is the distinction operating between the traveling shot which "advances" and the traveling shot which "enlarges": all dollying forward both brings the camera closer to its subject and makes it enlarge within the frame. It is not clear therefore what would prevent *L'Homme à la tête de Caoutchouc* (also) being credited with a "first traveling shot," except that Mitry again interposes—without saying it and undoubtedly without realizing it—the precise context of the production of the particular traveling shot: trick effect in Méliès, narrative effect in Griffith.

14. See the beginning of the text in *Cahiers du cinéma*, nos. 229 (May 1971), 230 (July 1971), 231 (August–September 1971).

15. Christian Metz, *Langage et cinéma* (Paris: Larousse, 1971) and particularly the chapter "Tendance pansémique de certaines figures" (pp. 98–103) to which I shall return subsequently.

16. Metz, *Langage et cinéma*; Pascal Bonitzer, three articles in *Cahiers du cinéma*: "Réalité de la denotation"; "Le Gros Orteil" (October 1971) no. 232; and "Fétichisme du plan" in this issue [(November 1971), no. 233]. Metz's concern to unravel the overabounding terminological and conceptual confusions in critical and theoretical metalanguage invites one to extend the concern to technical metalanguage.

17. Mitry, *Esthétique*, 1:273.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

19. Paulhan, *La Peinture Cubiste* (Denoël-Gonthier, Médiations), p. 86.

20. Quoted by Jean Vivié, *Historique et développement de la technique cinématographique* (B. P. I.), p. 64. This work does not come near to carrying out the program inscribed by its title. It is symptomatic that no "history of cinematographic technique" exists, at least none in French. There are practical manuals and glosses on the fabrication of the "first" equipment, but outside this mythical past and this present of practice (and even the future of "progress"), the technicians have no history.

21. This date is the one given by Mitry. It's not the only one, as we shall see. Brunius, agreeing with Bessy and Chardans' *Dictionary* [see note 25—ED.] gives 1927 (the sound film). There may well be a relationship (direct or indirect) between the disappearance of depth of field and the coming of sound.

22. Quoted in *La Revue de cinéma* (January 1947), no. 4, p. 24. (The question of depth of field recurs all through this issue.) Quotations drawn from J. B. Brunius' *Photographie et photographie de cinéma* (Arts et Métiers graphiques, 1938).

23. One wonders who: if the date of change is indeed around 1925, "the influence of Soviet cinema" could not possibly have been strong.

24. Mitry, *Esthétique*, 2:41.

25. By Maurice Bessy and J.-L. Chardans (Pauvert): the only dictionary in which there are some technical details and a little technical history. *L'Encyclopédie Universalis*, in the chapter "Technique d'un cinéma," gives the title "Emulsions" to a paragraph which treats only the format of films.

26. ["Cutting-up/assemblage operations" is a rendering of Comolli's term *découpage*. There seems to be no English term which captures the implications of the French. Briefly, a possible sense of the verb *découper* is not only to cut into pieces, but also to carve out. Thus one of Comolli's points is that the psychological dramas in silent film involve a "carving out," whereby the most pertinent elements of the psychological drama occur in the foreground and are played out against the scenic background. (This can be quite evident for some films in the use of process shots.)

But for cinema the noun *découpage* has specialized meanings. To begin with, it is rooted in the verb *couper*, to cut, which as in English can denote the activity of editing a film. However, *découpage* itself means something like the English terms "shooting script," "storyboard," or "shot breakdown." In addition, in his *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Praeger,

1973), Noël Burch glosses the French term, pointing out some of its further potential not captured in English renderings. As Burch puts it on p. 4:

Formally, a film consists of a succession of fragments excerpted from a spatial and temporal continuum. *Découpage* in its [further] meaning refers to what results when the spatial fragments, or, more accurately, the succession of spatial fragments excerpted in the shooting process, converge with the temporal fragments whose duration may be roughly determined during the shooting, but whose final duration is established only on the editing table.

Thus, the noun *découpage* implies the synthetic organizational structure underlying and governing the spatiotemporal composition of a film—the specific mode by which a film cuts up and joins together time and space.

It seems, then, that with the term *découpelement* Comolli is not solely highlighting the codified and organized stratification and sectioning ("cutting-up/assemblage") of the dramatic scene in terms of the *spatial* organization of a given *frame*. In addition, he is simultaneously (if somewhat implicitly) indicating that that this "synchronic" construction of space is tied to the *temporal* organization of spatial fragments ("cutting-up/assemblage") in the classical cinematic system of signification. That is, Comolli suggests that relations of temporal fragments (often highlighted in discussions of editing) are tied to another axis of the partitioning of space, one which (for the period he is interested in) gives much emphasis to the organization of depth planes; and that the history of the classical cinematic construction of space is to be theorized along both these axes. Their mobilization as part of the heritage of the "psychological drama" of the silent period provides one avenue of thinking through their interrelation. Perhaps it is to emphasize his doubled use of the term that Comolli uses *découpelement* rather than the more usual *découpage* here.—ED.]

—Translated by Diana Matias.

Revisions in translation by Marcia Butzel and Philip Rosen