

Mitry, Jean. *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*. (A shorter and different version of this will appear in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*, Edward Branigan and Warren Buckland Eds.)

In 1963 and 1965 Jean Mitry¹ published two massive tomes that, according to Christian Metz who reviewed them, bookended the period sometimes known as ‘classical film theory.’ Just slightly under 1000 pages long, printed in a large format, the two books are colossal in both size and scope. The first book, entitled ‘*Les structures*’ deals with the conditions according to which the worldly objects presented by film are framed, composed, organized and turned into *intentional image-objects*.² These are the principles according to which film acquires form. The second volume, entitled ‘*Les formes*’ is more concerned with the acquired forms themselves, understood historically and comparatively with other structuring forms in other media. In classical Aristotelian terms, one might say that the first book is centrally concerned with the fabric, substratum or *matter* of film as a mode of expression; whereas the second book is more directly concerned with the way this substance has manifested itself formally. Yet I would hesitate to strictly characterize the two books in such a fashion. For both also have several recurring concerns: for instance, the issue of ‘film language,’ appears early in the first book and returns late in the second one;³ and there is a recurring theme throughout which consists of distinguishing the cinema from other forms of expression with which it has often been compared, visual-spatial (especially painting), aural-rhythmic (especially music) and narrative-spatial-temporal (especially theatre and literature). Throughout, Mitry also spells out aesthetic principles with which to judge or ascertain the achievements (or failures) of certain films. Furthermore, readers of the original French text will also notice long (though no less stimulating) digressions that take them off the path of film studies, at least in the limited sense of the term, leading into discussions of logic, aesthetics, philosophy of language, musicology and the study of rhythm, poetry, the history of theatrical and literary forms, epistemology, and even quantum mechanics. Thus, before discussing cinematic rhythm Mitry devotes several dozen pages to investigating the nature of rhythm in music or poetry; and before discussing (and historicizing) the temporal and spatial forms of drama, literature and film he spends no less than one hundred pages discussing quantum physics and its epistemological consequences.⁴

There is not enough space here to give a full account of Mitry’s theoretical *summa*, even less to discuss his many other works. Moreover, because Mitry’s *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (*EPC*) covers so much ground and offers insights on so many different topics readers have sometimes had difficulty identifying a central unifying line of argument. There is, however, a common underlying thread that joins together aspects of *EPC* seemingly as diverse as Mitry’s theory of film representation and film language (his semiotic), his epistemology and his conception of aesthetic goodness in the cinema. It is this thread that I wish to briefly outline.

1. Epistemology & Quantum Mechanics

The sections of *EPC* devoted to epistemology and quantum physics appear in volume II and have been expunged from the English translation. At the time of its publication Mitry was contemplating writing a philosophical treatise entitled *Le réel physique et les données du monde sensible* (*Physical Reality and the Data of the Sensible World*) which seems to have never been written (there are no traces in the small Mitry archive fund of the Bibliothèque Nationale). Yet the mere mention of this book project in a footnote of *EPC* indicates that these were not matters that Mitry took lightly. Moreover, a strong current connects Mitry’s *dual* conception of filmic representation and the aesthetic consequences he draws from it for film

art, to his epistemology, which he sees as being supported by quantum mechanics. Though it might be too strong to imply that Mitry's film semiotics and aesthetics *rely* on the theory of knowledge as a first principle, they are certainly *cognate* and, to some extent, *mirror reflections* of each other.⁵

Mitry's philosophical project seeks to bridge the gap that separates *realism* and *idealism*. As he sees it, the problem is that both philosophical options require distinguishing subject and object as a starting point, realism giving precedence to the object and idealism to the subject. Phenomenologists like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, he claims, though they have sometimes come close to it, have nonetheless failed to fully overcome this age-old dualism. What needs to be shown, therefore, is that neither object nor subject precede experience, i.e., that neither one precede the other in our dealings with the world. Mitry enlists quantum mechanics to show that even though something exists — in a rather *undifferentiated* state as a *power* or an *energy* — independently from our perception, such a thing is not yet an *object* properly speaking. “The object,” he writes, “doesn't preexist the perceptual act, it completes it: it is an expression of it” (vol. II: 186). What is perceived, though it belongs in some fashion to a reality or totality that is external to us and from which it is *extracted*, doesn't preexist perception *qua* object. It only becomes an object through the mediation and *framing* of sensation and consciousness, though consciousness doesn't create or fabricate it nor does it precede it. “Reality perceived,” writes Mitry, “*is the form of our perception, which is determined [...] by sensation. To perceive is to construct a world; to be aware of it is to give ourselves this world as object*” (vol. II: 191). Equally, then, the subject only emerges or becomes conscious of itself when it becomes aware — through perception — of that which it is not, namely the object of perception. Consciousness is thus likewise the completion of perception “reflecting upon itself” (vol. II: 205). In short: sensation breaks down an undifferentiated or formless manifold from which there emerges an object (which appears as a given) as well as a consciousness of that object (which manifests itself as an interpretation of the given, whether that interpretation automatically registers the meaning of the object without “adding” anything to it, without ‘structuring’ it, as Gestalt theory has it; or whether it *secondarily* structures it, giving it or adding a meaning — a sort of *seeing as* —, as phenomenology has it). Consequently, Mitry rejects any realism toward general terms as a form of empty essentialism and instead sides with Hume's rejection of metaphysics adopting an empiricist view of concepts (they only “exist in the mind of he who passes judgment or observes, not in the thing observed” [vol. II: 213]). Mitry uses the claims of quantum physics in order to illustrate how objects that emerge in perception cannot be, *qua* object, identical with the physical world, i.e., with that undifferentiated something which exists independently of us as power or energy (objects in *potentia*) and how, at the microphysical level, the principle of indeterminacy implies the impossibility of distinguishing between the objective and the subjective. Likewise quantum physics conceives of time and space not as *a priori* but as emergent properties of the world (*quanta*) expressed by fields and successions (i.e., by relations) — much like, in Mitry's view, objecthood and subjecthood are expressions of the perceptual act whereby they emerge.⁶

2. Film Language and Aesthetics

Let us now consider how Mitry's epistemology reflects itself in his film theory and aesthetic prescriptions concerning the cinema. We shall see how his wish to overcome the idealism/realism divide in philosophy is echoed by his attempt to bring together the formative and realist traditions in film theory.

Mitry's approach to the issue of signification in the cinema has him use a rather uncommon distinction between two conceptions of signs: *psychological* and *linguistic* signs. To put it simply, psychological signs concern the mental representations we have of worldly objects in perception.⁷ Linguistic signs, on the other hand, are usually understood as forms (in some cases: concrete things that embody these forms) which come to arbitrarily or conventionally stand for abstract mental constructs such as ideas or concepts. Mitry, however, opts for Husserl's broader characterization of these signs as that for which, "in the act of signifying, signification is not given to consciousness as an object" (vol. I: 120).⁸ This conception is broad enough to include both linguistic signs and film *symbols*. The canonical example of the latter is Dr. Smirnov's dangling *pince-nez* in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925): it stands for the doctor "or, more exactly, signifies his 'absence'" (vol. I: 121). Even more so, through a process of association the *pince-nez* comes to signify "the bankruptcy of the bourgeois class 'thrown overboard'" (Ibid.). This is akin to linguistic signification, but only insofar as *something comes to stand for something else* — in this case, something which is not perceived or perceivable.⁹ However, this is not to say that verbal and filmic signification are alike in all other ways, in fact they are profoundly different. Most importantly filmic signification is not *fixed* or conventional, but develops entirely in context and relationally: the same *pince-nez* in a different film or in a different sequence could likely mean something entirely different.

Symbols such as the *pince-nez* from *Potemkin* obviously abound in the art of literature, which is founded on the aesthetic use of verbal language. However, symbols of this sort don't exhaust the phenomenon of filmic representation. For the *pince-nez* to become a symbol of something else (thanks to a chain of context-dependent associations), one must account for the representation of the *pince-nez* itself in the film. Here, film and verbal language part company because of the role played therein by perception. Whereas verbal language expresses ideas *via* concepts whose source lies in the unmediated objects of perception and whose understanding requires a mediating (though vague) mental image, film gives us a direct and concrete image of a thing that can be perceived immediately. This object, however, is not *identical* with the object of perception since its support is purely visual (one can't sit on the projected film image of a chair, for instance); rather, both are *analogous*.¹⁰ Whence, writes Mitry, if "I don't seek to mobilize *representation* in the same way I can mobilize the *object represented* [the "real" chair], this image appears to my gaze the same way reality itself does" (vol. I: 109. Italics mine). On the other hand — thanks to the presence of the filmmaker — film offers a *framed* and *composed* object, not the undifferentiated physical world. In other words, the image *qua* image is already laden with *intentionality*. It is this dual object — the unmediated object perceived directly *and* the intentional object of the image — that can acquire symbolic status through secondary *aesthetic* structuring, in which case film becomes both a form of language and a form of art. For Mitry, the specificity of cinematic representation lies in this duality of the film object. Let's briefly unpack these ideas.

What distinguishes Mitry from the early structuralist film semioticians (namely, Barthes and Metz) is that his conception of representation isn't modeled on linguistics and verbal language. For him, whatever its manifestation (verbal, pictorial, filmic or otherwise), language is that which expresses and communicates thought (ideas, emotions) and its operations (*viz.*, relations of analogy, consequence, causality, etc.¹¹). If Mitry can be called a semiotician of the cinema, it is because he investigates the conditions for the expression of thought in film as the (non metaphorical) basis for film language. The first condition, therefore, is the objective presence of the world on the screen as *analogon* (for example, this

corresponds to the representation of the *pince-nez qua pince-nez* in *Potemkin*). For Mitry, however, the nature of this presence is dual. *First*, if one considers merely what has impressed each frame of a film, one has a ‘mere’ image, i.e., under such conditions the thing represented tends to fade in favor of its representation (as it happens with a painting, for instance): one perceives an image and images are intentional (an image is always an image of something): its object is *formed, framed, composed*.¹² *Second*, once the image is projected, i.e., once movement and depth enter into the experience of it, the relation between what is represented and representation is inverted: what one sees is no longer the image of something, but something *through* an image. Whence one perceives filmed objects *in the same way* that one directly perceives worldly objects: as exempt of all intentionality. As a result the ‘literal’ film object has a double nature: as ‘object proper’ (that which is perceived immediately in a manner analogous to the normal functioning of perception) and as ‘subject’ or *Vorstellung* (the intentional object of the image). In the first instance, the film image can be said to have recorded (and to show) a particular, singular object. If it shows a *pince-nez*, it is *this* particular *pince-nez* (the one that stood in front of Tissé’s camera lens at the time of shooting *Potemkin*) that it gives us. In the second instance, however, the now intentional object is framed, composed and caught in the force field of a *form* (a frame, a montage, a narrative, etc.). As such, it becomes a function and stands for something general, for a concept or an *idea*. It isn’t this particular *pince-nez* anymore that is seen, but through it (through the image of it) is expressed the idea (or function) of a *pince-nez in general* (this means *any pince-nez*, including all the ones — real or *in potentia* — that aren’t on the screen). In this latter case, the image as (psychological) *sign* becomes the “existential manifestation of an idea” (vol. I: 133). Camera angle, camera movement, montage and especially framing¹³ all turn what is experienced immediately into an *image proper* (phenomenologically speaking: an intentional object), i.e., into aesthetically structured forms or representations, and therefore serve the filmic representation of ideas. Regardless of any symbolic character, therefore, the film viewer faces a *dual object*: the unmediated object perceived directly *and* the intentional object — framed, composed — of the image. Mitry calls this dual object the *analogon*. And it is the intentional part of this analogon that *mediates* between the direct, non-intentional aspect of the film experience.

Thus, unlike verbal representation, Mitry conceives cinematic representation as moving from concrete to abstract stuff.¹⁴ It is on this basis that film can become a language, more specifically: an *aesthetic language*.¹⁵ In structuralist terms (and unlike Barthes or Metz) Mitry would have it that only ‘connotation’ constitutes a language in film, not ‘denotation.’ Film, therefore, is not *genetically* a language; it becomes so when it symbolically uses the ideas and concepts that emerge in the representation of objects, i.e., when matters of fact become relations of ideas through aesthetic structuring (vol. I: 122).

Mitry’s conception of film language and especially his dual understanding of filmic representation clearly seek to unite the formative/realist traditions of classical film theory, a move that is cognate in his mind with overcoming the idealist/realist traditions in epistemology: in both cases one must avoid giving precedence to object or subject. If indeed the cinema can lead to this view of things, then perhaps we may understand Mitry’s bold claim that “there is more philosophy in any film than there is in all of Aristotle or all of Plato” (vol. II: 277).

In classical film theory, the formative vs. realist debate typically seeps into film criticism, often serving to justify aesthetic prescriptions. Likewise, Mitry’s integrative theory

of filmic representation and his conception of film language also serve as a basis for aesthetic evaluation.

For Mitry, a key task in producing art consists in finding the proper form to express content, understood that form and content are two sides of a single coin. In the process, the content acquires meaning, significance or value it wouldn't otherwise be represented as having. We have seen that this is the *raison d'être* of the symbol in film: through the symbol, the film signifies more than it can represent. This implies that film art is coextensive with filmic language: "every artistic expression," writes Mitry, "results from a connotation" (vol. II: 378). In short: it is through the symbol's associativity (analogies, metaphors, metonymies), whose skin is composed of the *analogon* of filmic representation — that amalgam of unmediated perceived object and intentional image-object in its various compositional and pictorial structures, rhythm or narrative form — that the film enters into the realm of art.

For the spectator, of course, what makes a symbol is the imaginative ability to see more in a concrete slice of film than what is actually depicted to the senses. The symbol essentially rests in the *mental images* suggested or triggered by the film's imagery.¹⁶ Because symbols don't exist in the sensible world, Mitry's aesthetics eschews calls for absolute realism in the cinema (reality, after all, isn't art). This leads him to critique realist films whose depicted reality is so utterly banal as to be devoid of any profound meaning or significance and hinder the spectator's imagination. It is on this basis that he calls De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) "boring and wearisome" (vol. II: 418). However, he also concedes that a film could not be made up entirely of symbols for they only make sense relatively to filmic representation (the *analogon*) and its structuring. This is how, for instance, the symbol deepens the otherwise literal meaning of a narrative. As a result, Mitry considers that film ought to be fully comprehensible regardless of the viewer's ability to interpret the symbol.¹⁷ Consequently, he rejects as 'uncinematic' films that are overtly symbolic even if they are otherwise noteworthy (an example among others given in *EPC* is Bergman's *The Silence*, [1963]; and elsewhere he also criticizes Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* [1929] and several sequences from Eisenstein on similar ground¹⁸). In such films, explains Mitry, the filmmaker tries to 'shoot' symbols, i.e., to illustrate pre-established concepts or arbitrarily impose symbols on the depicted reality. Rather the filmmaker should strive to let the symbols grow in the spectator's mind from the filmic representation, giving the impression that it is reality itself which is fraught with meaning. Herein lies the key to Mitry's aesthetic. It isn't an apology for a particular film style, mode or genre but an argument for a more general aesthetic attitude toward the cinema and its relation to the world it captures and structures. And though, throughout the book, the argument privileges narrative form, Mitry can nonetheless use it to justify his own avant-garde and experimental short films (the best known one being *Pacific 231*, 1949) whereby rhythmic forms borrowed from music are used to establish relations between things rather than between facts or events. Here, cinema becomes concrete poetry, a means to probe the "existential mystery of the world and of things" (vol. II: 430).

In the end, Mitry believed that this attitude is able to manifest itself in two ways: *realism* and *irrealism*. Both can attain cinematic art equally well. Experimental films like *Pacific 231* or expressionist films like *The Last Laugh* (Murnau, 1924¹⁹) are formally irrealistic, while films as diverse as Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel* (1962) and Bresson's *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956) are irrealistic in content — regardless of their attention to 'details' or verisimilitude — in that they either seek to explain or interpret the meaning of the world as we know it through an unsettling chain of events (Buñuel) or attain some transcendent truth about it using concrete reality but *in abstracto*, i.e., without any concern for social or historical

situatedness (Bresson). In all these forms of irrealism, however, understanding appears to emerge from the concrete reality represented. Realism, on the other hand, seeks to achieve understanding, to symbolically grasp the meaning of the world, by first showing it and presenting the facts and events that take place in it — immediately, concretely — as we know them to be, as they are lived (morally, historically, socially, culturally), thus limiting to a minimum the degree abstraction imposed by formal structuring.

If, in the end, Mitry shows a preference for realist films it is because he sees them as more relevant to the contemporary world. Less overtly formalized, they give the impression of being freer, looser, and more ‘open,’ much like reality itself. Unlike a number of irrealist films they don’t appear ‘locked’ into a formal system or limited by it. In advocating for an open cinema, Mitry supports a dramaturgy that is closer to the novel than to classical drama whose fixed and “closed” structures reflect the cosmology of Greek Antiquity. An open dramaturgy, on the other hand, corresponds more fully with a contingent world marked by change, movement and history and whose key forms are temporal rather than spatial; a world best expressed by the art of cinema and its ability to literally and freely show and express — given the proper form — the worldly unfolding of things and events.

¹ Jean Mitry’s real name was Jean René Goetgheluck Le Rouge Tillard Des Acres de Presfontaines. Born in Soisson in France, there is some debate regarding the year of his birth some sources opting for 1904 (the correct date I believe) and others for 1907. Mitry himself was quite coy about this. He borrowed the name “Mitry” from a little commune (Mitry-Mory) about 25 km from Meaux. He was Active in the French film scene starting in the 20s, writing reviews and becoming one of many assistants to Abel Gance during the shooting of *Napoléon* (1924). He also assisted Pierre Chenal and Jean Epstein. He became a staple of the *ciné-club* culture belonging to several of them, including *La tribune libre du cinéma* which had been founded by Fernand Léger in 1925 and which Mitry soon took over with a few friends. Still working as a film technician, he also played a few roles including that of Arsène in Jean Renoir’s *La nuit du Carrefour* (1932). In 1935 he founded, with Henri Langlois and Georges Franju le Cercle du cinéma, which became the Cinémathèque française the following year. He was the Cinémathèque’s first archivist (1930-1945). After the war he joined the newly formed film school IDHEC where he taught film history and film theory. He also made several short films between the 40s and early 60s and directed his only feature in 1959 (*Énigme aux Folies-Bergères*). Between 1966 and 1970 he became the first professor of film studies at a Canadian University (Université de Montréal). He then accepts a position at Paris 1 (Sorbonne-Panthéon) where he continued to supervise theses until 1980. He died in 1988. Mitry is perhaps the most prolific writer on cinema ever. Besides publishing the two volumes of *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*, he published a large five volume *Histoire du cinéma*, a history of experimental cinema (*Le cinéma expérimental*), a critique of film semiology (*La sémiologie en question*), monographs and studies of John Ford, Chaplin, Eisenstein, René Clair, Thomas Ince, a *Dictionnaire du cinéma*, and a massive 35 volume universal filmography.

² Let us dispel any possible confusion regarding this term. Intentionality is the property of representations which belong to minds (and thus to subjects). Representations are intentional because they are always representations *of* something. A material image, however, is a thing (or object) that is *about* something else. It is an *intentional object* that behaves in this regard like a mind or subject.

³ In the lapse between the two tomes, Christian Metz had published “Le cinéma: langue ou langage” (1964) and Mitry obviously felt he needed to return to the issue.

⁴ I mention this because both the more recent French edition (established by Benoît Patar from notes by Mitry in 1990) and its English translation (by Christopher King) have significantly reduced these sections. The English text is in fact an abridged version of the abridged French edition.

⁵ Indeed, it isn’t clear in *EPC* whether it is philosophy that explains film or whether, the other way around, it is film (the experience of film) that leads to philosophy: “As in the first ages the first thinking man, moved by his reflection, suddenly intuited a ‘double’ which he turned into a divinity or a universal soul, we can now question the reality of the world by opposing to our normal perception a new perception, similar and yet different: filmic

perception.” (vol. II: 277). Merleau-Ponty, in his famous essay of 1947, also saw a congruence between cinema and phenomenology (and the “new psychology”).

⁶ In the end, according to Mitry, “Realism and Idealism, which become assimilated in the correlative data of perception, are but abstractions arbitrarily separating the two sides of a single complex phenomenon” which involves the emerge of object and subject (vol. II: 256).

⁷ One might say that such signs belong to a theory of knowledge based in psychology.

⁸ Mitry here is referring to Husserl’s conception of “real objects,” i.e., sensuous objects perceived directly and devoid of intentionality.

⁹ Augustine famously defined the sign by the formula: *Aliquid stat pro aliquo* (Something stands for something else).

¹⁰ Consequently, the fact that the image may be in black and white, that it may be produced by varying focal lengths, and that it is flat do not, for Mitry, alter its analogous character with regards to the perceptual image, as long as what we are concerned with is an “ordinary” (“*quelconque*”) and “impersonal” film image, i.e., one exempt from aesthetic “stylings.” This, of course, is a heuristic theoretical fiction and Mitry is quite aware of it.

¹¹ For Mitry the distinction between logic and psychology is very thin: “what separates pure logicians from psychologists or psycho-logicians is uniquely a difference in perspective — objective or subjective. The former only consider the result and the necessary conditions for achieving this result, the latter only considers the intellectual act by which the result is achieved.” (vol. I: 88)

¹² Here Mitry clearly approximates Sartre’s conception of image as consciousness.

¹³ The dual nature of filmic representation for Mitry means that he considers the contour of the image to be both a *cache* (Bazin) and a *pictorial/compositional frame* (Eisenstein, Arnheim).

¹⁴ This ‘movement’ pertains to psychology since Mitry’s epistemology doesn’t recognize the mind-independent reality of generals. For Mitry, laws (including the laws of nature), concepts, ideas can only exist as the intentional products of our consciousness.

¹⁵ It follows for Mitry that not every (psychological) sign in cinema is a symbol, though every symbol is a sign (cf. vol. II: 443).

¹⁶ Mitry here is partly influenced by Eisenstein, whom he met in 1929 during the filmmaker’s famous trip abroad that led him to Mexico. See my “Eisenstein, Rhetoric and Imaginicity: Toward a Revolutionary Memoria” in *Screen*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2000).

¹⁷ Mitry fails to consider the issues raised by interpretation (do all viewers interpret the symbol in like manner?) and possible overinterpretations. Nonetheless, his theory makes the spectator an important contributor to the art of film. A film, then, is only as rich and interesting aesthetically as the viewer is imaginative and posses a nimble mind. A most interesting idea, Mitry didn’t seek to investigate all of its consequences.

¹⁸ Cf. *Histoire du cinéma. Art et industrie*, vol. III 1923-1930, Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1973, p. 349; Eisenstein, Paris: Éditions universitaires, Jean-Pierre Delarge, 1978, third revised edition, esp. pp. 46-92.

¹⁹ In his *Histoire du cinéma* Mitry writes that form in Murnau’s film is too conspicuous for it to be labeled “realist,” yet he sees it as a masterpiece of “realist expressionism” and lauds the filmmaker for his ability to draw symbols from the images he records and manipulates. *Histoire du cinéma. Art et industrie*, vol. III 1923-1930, pp. 208-214.