Italian Film Semiotics (1965–2020)*

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Summary. The paper describes the development of film semiotics in Italy, from the early foundation of the discipline to the contribution of recent scholars. In particular, a first change of paradigm occurred during the 1980s, when the focus of the research shifted from the film's codes to pragmatic issues. In the new millennium, a second turn involved the notion of intersemiotic translation, which anticipated the international debate on intermediality. Italian film semiotics is not to be considered a "school": it is rather a discussion between different perspectives on the foundation of semiotics (phenomenological, pragmatic, and post-structuralist) in which Italian scholars were actively connected to the international semiotic debate. Since many Italian semioticians avoided specialising in film theory, their work proved to be useful in new research fields such as broadcasting, internet, videogames, virtual reality, informatics, thus contributing to the cross-fertilisation of media studies.

Keywords. Enunciation, intersemiotic translation, intermediality, pragmatics, media studies

Zusammenfassung. Der Artikel beschreibt die Entwicklung der Filmsemiotik in Italien, von den Anfängen der Disziplin bis zu aktuellen Beiträgen. Während der 1980er Jahre ereignete sich ein erster Paradigmenwechsel; der Schwerpunkt wechselt von filmischen Codes zu pragmatischen Fragestellungen. In den 2000ern erfolgte eine zweite Wendung, die das Konzept der intersemiotischen Übersetzung einschloss und die internationale Debatte über Intermedialität vorwegnahm. Die italienische Filmsemiotik ist nicht als „Schule" zu betrachten, sondern vielmehr als Diskussion zwischen verschiedenen Perspektiven zur Grundlage der Semiotik (phänomenologisch, pragmatisch und post-strukturalistisch). Italienische Forscher:innen waren und sind aktiv in die internationale semiotische Debatte eingebunden. Obwohl oder gerade weil viele italienische Semiotiker:innen es vermieden, sich auf Filmtheorie zu spezialisieren, erwies sich ihre Arbeit in neuen Forschungsfeldern wie Rundfunk, Internet, Videospiele, Virtual Reality und Informatik als nützlich und trug so zur gegenseitigen Befruchtung der Medienwissenschaften bei.

Schlüsselwörter. Artikulation, intersemiotische Übersetzung, Intermedialität, Pragmatik, Medienwissenschaft

1. The early days (1965–1979)

Film semiotics in Italy dates back to the very beginning of the semiotic debate. Between 1965 and 1967, Christian Metz, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Umberto Eco participated in the seminal panels aimed at founding film semiotics organised by the *Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema* in Pesaro. At these panels they discussed the linguistic structure of cinema (Bruno 1991: 30) or – as Pasolini proposed – the semiotics of the audiovisual (Eco 1968: 149). At the *Centre for Semiotics and Linguistics* in Urbino, founded by Pino Paioni, Carlo Bo, and Paolo Fabbri in 1970 at the suggestion of Algirdas Greimas and currently directed by Gianfranco Marrone, these discussions continued with two conferences: the first, organised by Christian Metz and René Lindekens in 1971 and dedicated to audiovisual semiotics, was attended by Francesco Casetti and Claude Chabrol, amongst others; the second, in 1976, again organised by Metz, Marie Claire Ropars and Lino Micciché, was dedicated to the problems of analysing the filmic text. Speakers included semioticians, intellectuals, sociologists and film critics such as Alberto Abruzzese, Beniamino Placido, Gianfranco Bettetini, Gian Piero Brunetta and Maurizio Grande, testifying to the success of the discipline in providing new interpretative tools for film theory.

Umberto Eco needs no introduction: after his philosophical studies, he set out to locate a scientific re-foundation of aesthetics in Information Theory (IT) (cf. Eco 1962). Emilio Garroni convinced Eco that IT does not provide any insights into meaning or interpretation, however, thus opening the way for semiotic research. Nevertheless, IT provided a material foundation for semiotics in terms of the articulation of expressive units, and Ross Quillian's computational semantics was the inspiration for Eco's encyclopaedic representation of culture. During his scholarly career, Eco constantly sought to link Italian culture, often traditionalist and parochial, to the most recent developments and paradigms in international research, from structural linguistics, semiotics, and information theory to analytic philosophy and cognitive science, always searching for connections with semiotic theory even when attempts to strike up a dialogue proved fruitless.

Pier Paolo Pasolini was one of the most prominent and influential intellectuals of the second half of the 20th Century. He is well known as a poet, filmmaker, and writer. His contributions to the foundations of Italian semiotics are collected in *Heretical Empiricism* (1972). He founded no school and left no heirs; his research exerted more influence abroad than in Italy, especially in France and the USA where his work influenced women's studies (Bruno 1991).

1.1 Film semiotics or reality?

Eco (1968) summarised the three respective positions on film semiotics that were formulated in Pesaro. According to Metz (1964), there is no cin-

ematographic equivalent to the linguistic system: before the movie there is only the image, which mirrors reality and cannot be further analysed in terms of units. Consequently, each shot is a surrogate stimulus. For this reason, the only possible semiotic research would be studies of the syntagmatic organisation of the film. Pasolini agreed with Metz regarding the relationship between image and reality but analysed each shot by breaking it down into the real objects that compose it. According to Pasolini, cinema can be defined as the "written language" (Pasolini 1972: 197) of reality, and reality in turn is to be considered a semiotic organisation. Eco (1968: 154–158) agreed with Pasolini on cinematographic articulation while at the same time criticising the idea of a semiotics of reality, labelled "ur-semiotics". Eco's view converged with that of Metz in that the latter fell back on his previous positions by proposing to identify two levels of coding that come together in film: first, an anthropological and cultural level (iconic codes governing perception and representation) and, second, more specialised codes governing the frame, cut, and narrative structure of the film (1968: 151). Eco thus supported Metz in opposition to Pasolini. At the time, Eco was convinced that the aim of semiotics was to reduce "nature" to cultural phenomena, not vice-versa. Eco considered the idea of a semiotics of reality to be unacceptable and naïve (1968: 152). Eco's position was founded on a more general criticism of the notion of i c o n i c   s i g n (1968: 112) according to which there is a relationship of "likeness" between signs and things. According to Eco, semiotics should explain h o w this kind of relationship is established.

During the 1970s, Eco's journal of semiotics, *Versus* (AA.VV. 1972) launched a debate on iconism in which semiotics scholars such as Gianfranco Bettetini, Ugo Volli, and Francesco Casetti all took part. Eco's thesis was opposed by Tomas Maldonado (1974), who had applied semiotics to design theory to formulate the well-known Ulm Model. The problem represented by iconic signs remained central to Eco's research throughout his life even though in the 1990s he began searching for an answer to this problem in the naturalising approach of cognitive sciences, a direction that ultimately proved fruitless (Eco 1997). At the time, however, Eco's position was anti-naturalistic and anti-referentialist. Pasolini replied to Eco in an essay identifying the code of reality with the ur-code, the code of codes:

> I therefore do not see why the minimal unit of an Ur-code – that is, the cognitive code of reality, that is, the self-revealing objects – cannot become a minimal level of another, higher code which is more cultural in a technical sense (Pasolini 1972: 279–280).

While elsewhere Pasolini's position was further developed (De Lauretis 1981), in the Italian community of semioticians, Eco's position prevailed (Costa 1993: 140). Recently, Gianfranco Marrone (2021) has reinterpreted this debate, noting that Pasolini's choice of words was indeed equivocal, but his purpose was to suggest a "third way" between iconodulism and iconoclasm according to which images are natural but nature is already cultural in and of itself.

1.2 Other themes developed by Pasolini

Pasolini's work significantly impacted visual semiotics. In particular, he considered images to be signs, called *im-signs* (Pasolini 1972: 70), a terminological choice reminiscent of Charles Peirce's classifications of signs. This theoretical option was filtered through Metz's work to influence French film semiotics:

> 'Objects' (and characters must also be included) – that is to say, the different basic elements of filmic discourse – do not enter the film in a virgin state; they carry with them, before even 'cinematographic language' can intervene, a great deal more than their simple literal identity – which does not prevent the spectator belonging to a given culture from deciphering this 'increment' at the same time that he identifies the object. This is the concept of the 'im-segno' as formulated by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Metz 1971: 113–114).

Among Pasolini's theoretical interests, his relationship with cinema and poetry was closely connected with the scientific debate emerging in Paris at the time:

> Much as writers do not always have a precise technical awareness of a process such as free indirect discourse, so directors, too, have until now established the stylistic premises for such a process either with the most absolute lack of awareness or with a very relative awareness. That nevertheless a free indirect discourse may also be possible for cinema is certain. Let us call this process a "free indirect point-of-view shot" (Pasolini 1972: 176).

Through the notion of "free indirect point-of-view shot", Pasolini sought to locate a semiotic and technical basis for the notion of film poetry so as to avoid the risks involved in idealistic approaches to critique. Pasolini's position was later re-assessed by Gilles Deleuze (1983: 71–75). Twenty years later, the notion of "free indirect point-of-view shot" re-surfaced in the semiotic debate on cinema and enunciation played out between Francesco Casetti and Christian Metz (Metz 1991: 132). In more recent times, Paolo Fabbri (1997: 123) has returned to this topic to underline that images are subjected to specific principles of enunciation, ones that are not comparable to language. Along the same lines, Gianfranco Marrone (2021) discusses this issue in the light of the contemporary debate on enunciation, as outlined below.

1.3 General features of early Italian film semiotics

A closer look at this debate allows us to understand why semiotics was able to interest a generation of Italian writers, philosophers, and filmmakers such as Pasolini and Eco. First, there is no single 'Italian school'. The research progresses dialectically through wide-ranging debates, orienting research groups. Second, the birth and transformation of semiotic research in Italy is the result of a shift in the relationship between Italian culture and other inter-

national cultures that resulted in cultural innovation. For example, according to Costa (1993: 129), Pasolini's early essays on cinema continued to employ the technical language of the previous generation: Gianfranco Contini's philological approach and Leo Spitzer's idealistic methods, developed later, were able to shrug off this legacy. Semiotics allowed the younger generation to emancipate themselves. While German was the working language of Benedetto Croce and his epigones, during the 1960s French intellectuals became the new welcome interlocutors. A general characteristic of Italian approaches to film semiotics, approaches that remained stable over the decades, is their connection to international debates: French post-structuralism, Anglo-Saxon pragmatics, and – in recent times – media theory. Drawing on Lotman and Uspenskij (1978), it is useful to consider culture as a model of the world with an internal and external space. Other cultures can be identified as sectors of the external space, some of which are conjoined to the internal space by orientation vectors (see Galofaro 2015). According to this perspective, language plays a crucial role: if we consider Italian culture, the orientation vector shifted from German to French at the end of the 1950s, and was then progressively extended to English starting from the end of the 1970s.

1.4 Semiotics and television

Furthermore, the considerable attention granted to cinema reveals the explanatory power of semiotics when applied to the new features of mass culture, whereas older approaches, such as the Frankfurt School, seemed only capable of condemning mass culture as part of an apocalyptic perspective. Eco (1965: 24) openly accused Theodor Adorno of being a pseudo-Marxist and true reactionary: the new intellectuals aimed to understand – and, consequently, to overthrow – the mechanism of the media, its ideological production, and the way it manipulates the masses. Eco dedicated a great deal of writing to television during his lifetime, distinguishing, for example, paleo-television from neo-television:

> A complex phenomenon consisting of lots and lots of TV channels, all shot through with ads, and programmes that copy one another, taking turns to compete for the attention of the viewer who zaps compulsively on his remote control. Each programme talks about itself and addresses an audience that is part of the programme: the message, obsessively repeated, is not, "This is how the world is", but, "I am here, do you see me? This is the only reality that you will recognize from now on" (Eco 1965: 75–113).

In addition to Eco, other Italian scholars such as Aldo Grasso, Fausto Colombo and Francesco Casetti also began to apply semiotics to the analysis of television (cf. Bettetini 1996: 60). News and its ideological construction fell under scholarly observation from the very beginning: as case in point, we can cite seminal works by Calabrese and Volli (1979, 1995), followed, during the 1990s, by Gianfranco Marrone (1998). Maria Pia Pozzato (ed. 2000)

coordinated an interdisciplinary team to analyse the journalistic construction of the Kosovo War. It should be noted that, during the 1990s, Italian state television commissioned many scholars to conduct semiotic studies to verify the quality of its programming: these studies were published in the *Nuova Eri/Vqpt* book series. Contemporary Italian semiotics inherits from its founders a certain focus, less on the 'specific cinematographic' and more on audio-visual forms, new media and their respective relationships.

2.   From language to text (1980–2000)

At the end of the 1970s, the semiotic debate on the code, the linguistic and specific features of semiotic systems, and iconism had come to an end for three reasons: scientific, institutional, and political. From a scientific point of view, the body of knowledge about analysis procedures, syntagmatic rules, systems, processes and their respective relations had reached maturity and this saturation left little room for further research. From an institutional point of view, from 1971 onwards semiotics became a subject in university courses such as DAMS programmes (the disciplines of art, music, and performing arts) aimed at training technicians for the cultural industry. Semiotics ceased to be the object of intellectual debates and instead became a technical subject: during the 1980s, debates on the ideological nature of mass communication and television were progressively substituted by marketing consulting. Semiotics risked becoming a "pop epistemology for communicators" or "a technique to sell snacks", as Paolo Fabbri used to say (personal communication). For these reasons, from a political point of view and with a few exceptions, semiotics ceased to give rise to critical knowledge useful for social change in the way originally intended by Pasolini's and Umberto Eco's early work, or the scientific production of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (see for example Rossi-Landi 1968).

   If we look at the cultural relations maintained by the Italian debate in this period, French semiotics was constantly present. However, a new, 'pragmatic' research paradigm was beginning to take hold, one rooted in Oxford and Berkeley: the authors referenced in this thread of work are John Searle (1969) and Paul Grice (1975).

2.1 Narratology and pragmatics

As a result of the above-mentioned developments, the focus shifted to different topics and issues: in particular, narration and communication (see Bettetini 1996: 39). In 1979, two books redirected Italian semiotic research: Greimas's dictionary of semiotics (Greimas and Courtés 1979), which presents the most comprehensive semiotic model of narrative and textual structures, and Umberto Eco's attempt to encapsulate this model in a broader, pragmatist frame (Eco 1979). The former theory considers meaning imma-

nent and generative: starting from general, deep oppositions between semantic values, the model takes into account the conversions between semio-narrative and semio-discursive structures leading to the surface of the realised text. According to the second theory, the text presupposes some inferences in the attempt to reconstruct the possible world addressed by fictional references (e.g. "A long, long time ago, in a galaxy far away …"):

> At the level of discursive structure the reader is invited to fill up various empty phrastic spaces (texts are lazy machineries that ask someone to do part of their job). At the level of narrative structures, the reader is supposed to make forecasts concerning the future course of the *fabula* (Eco 1979: 214).

Eco's purpose was to study the effects of the text on the reader t h r o u g h the text, without resorting to any unnecessary hypotheses about the r e a l person reading the book or viewing the movie.

In the same period, Italian film semiotics adopted a similar research programme, enclosing narrative theory in a broader theoretical framework and focusing on the effects of the audiovisual text on the spectator (Bettetini 1979). The traditional opposition between models of interpersonal communication and mass communication was called into question by Gianfranco Bettetini (1984). As Francesco Casetti wrote:

> If in the past the spectator had existed at the outskirts of representation – as an occasional participant or simple consumer – she was now seen as someone summoned to weave the threads of the intrigue. The spectator became both a true recipient, insofar as the story unfolds for her, and an obligatory reference point, since she is already inscribed within the fabric of the representation (Casetti 1986: 7).

Francesco Casetti and Federico di Chio (1990) wrote a manual aimed at providing a methodological synthesis focused on analysis, a development that testifies to the fact that film semiotics had ceased to be the purview of a few intellectuals and had entered university courses more generally. This volume was an editorial success and ended up being translated into Spanish. In some ways, the manual retraces the stages of the research: segmentation, cinematographic codes, representation, and narration. Finally, the volume proposes a chapter on the analysis of communication, distinguishing between sender, implicit author, and narrator; receiver, implicit viewer, and narratee.

2.2 Beyond cinema

The label 'film semiotics' is reductive when considering the Italian debate on the audio-visual. Italian researchers have displayed exceptional curiosity, as testified by Gianfranco Bettetini's pioneering studies on Information Theory, video games, and Artificial Intelligence (Bettetini 1987) as well as his work on

computer graphics, virtual reality, interactivity, and hypertexts (Bettetini 1996). Bettetini applies the conversational model he had developed in reference to films to Human-Machine Interaction, finding analogies and differences between the two cases. In particular, the enunciator's competence is partially virtual and is actualised by means of an intervention on the part of the enunciatee; the latter becomes visible, assuming a simulacral body; and interaction is oriented towards action (Bettetini 1996: 149–154). According to Fausto Colombo (1993: 278–279), the operation performed by hypertexts is that of manifesting the true essence of textuality which is the simulation of experience, thereby creating a perceptive and psychological situation inside which the user finds the simulation of his or her experience. It is clear that Italian semiologists have tried to cope with these newer objects of analysis using concepts and instruments developed in relation to older genres of textuality, testing their solidity and partially broadening their meaning. Furthermore, the fact that they began analysing these technologies when they were still in the early stages of development prevented them ,to some extent, from focusing on important features of the new media in question, such as the interaction between different human simulacra in a virtual environment, an experience which in those years often proved frustrating and disappointing (Bettetini 1996: 92).

2.3 Enunciation

Francesco Casetti (1986) proposed a theory of film enunciation according to which it is possible to distinguish among four types of gazes (objective view, unreal objective view, subjective view, and interpellation) based on the different positions of enunciation (*I*-enunciator, *you*-enunciatee, *he*-narrator, or *he*-narratee) articulated through Greimas's logic square (Fig. 2) and by re-thinking the classical distinction between *personal* and *impersonal* enunciation (Benveniste 1966). The "I" position coincides with the enunciator, "you" corresponds to the enunciatee, and the "she/he" position can be occupied by a narratee or a narrator. The resulting types of gaze are:

1. The objective view, which corresponds to the nobody shot. The enunciator constructs this point of view as if "you and I, we gaze at him/her/it". The enunciatee must assume the position of a witness (Casetti 1986: 47).
2. Interpellation corresponds to the gaze into the camera. This point of view can be described as "she and I, we gaze at you" (Casetti 1986: 48).
3. The subjective view corresponds to the POV shot: "I make you gaze, you equally as her" (Casetti 1986: 49).
4. The impossible objective view could be confused with the nobody shot, but the point of view is not phenomenologically neutral, as in everyday experience: "what you see, thanks to me, is that I alone am able to see".
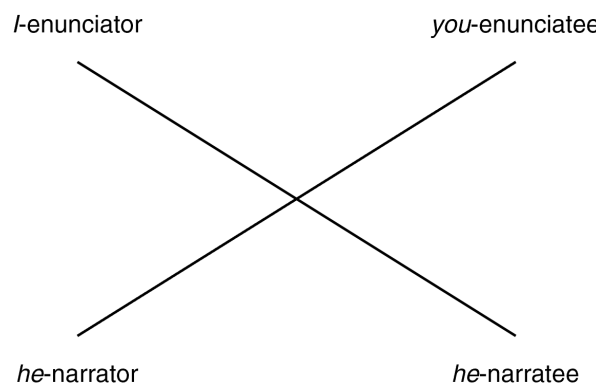
I-enunciator   *you*-enunciatee

he-narrator   *he*-narratee

Fig. 2. The semiotic square generating enunciational relations (Casetti 1986: 53).

This analysis of point of view relates vision to cognitive and epistemic modal values (to know, to believe) – see Greimas and Courtés (1979). In particular (Tab. 1):

Tab. 1. Point of view, cognitive and epistemic values (Casetti 1986: 71).

	Seeing	Knowing	Believing
Objective	Exhaustive	Diegetic	Solid
Impossible objective	Total	Metadiscursive	Absolute
Interpellation	Partial	Discursive	Relative
Subjective	Limited	Intradiegetic	Transitory

2.4 The debate on enunciation

Translated into French, Casetti's book (1986) brought Metz back to semiotics. In fact, Metz had not participated in the enunciational turn of this field of research during the 1980s, a turn that can also be considered to signal the self-affirmation of the younger generation. After concluding his inquiry into filmic codes, Metz shifted his methodological attention to psychoanalysis (Metz 1977). The relationship between early semiotics and structuralism can be considered a legacy of the structuralist program proposed by Michel Foucault (1966) in which three anti-human sciences (linguistics, psychoanalysis, and anthropology) are opposed to the three kernel human sciences characterising bourgeois society and the western myth of the philosophical subject. Another important author often quoted by Metz on this subject is Jacques Lacan, a scholar who influenced a generation of scholars – Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel de Certeau, among others.

Metz wrote the French preface to Casetti's book which was then translated in the English edition (Casetti 1986: XI–XV). In particular, Metz writes:

> The specificity of his work, for me, lies in the combination of these three traits: a formalizing aim, a concern to "cover" everything, a deliberately synoptic view. These characteristics are particularly striking in the powerful and new chart that is proposed for the four cardinal points of cinematographic enunciation, corresponding to just this many different combinations between an ideal I, a you, and a he/she. It should be understood that the aim of the book is not to make an inventory of the enunciative constructions, with their numerous concrete forms and their slight variations, but to propose a conceptual frame, with examples to support it, that can accommodate them all. This is a courageous undertaking, and I am in a position to salute it without scruple, since, on this point, I chose the opposite, or more precisely, the complementary path (Casetti 1986: XIV).

According to Metz (1991), the enunciator and enunciatee, the fictive positions featuring what he calls humanoid enunciation, do not exist. Film enunciation is impersonal. There are no pronouns or shifters in film language. It is true that Bettetini (1984) compares a movie to a conversation, but this is only a metaphor in that the public cannot answer even when explicitly harangued by a character on screen. Similarly, there are no narrators in a movie: when a character starts telling a story, sooner or later he must leave room for images. Enunciation is impersonal because it is based on technical devices. In fact, Metz argues, enunciation is sometimes revealed when its technical features are exhibited (e.g. representing other frames, mirrors or crosshairs in a frame). According to Metz, neither Benveniste's nor Genette's notions of enunciation are applicable to film semiotics. Instead of multiplying simulacral instances such as "I", "you", "she/he/it", theory should focus exclusively on the c y b l e (source) and f o y e r (target). Furthermore, analysis reveals that the c y b l e is not a person: it is a function and a process. At the same time, however, the target is a person: the spectator or analyst. In this framework, enunciation is defined as a soliloquy (Metz 1991: 164).

2.5 Effects of Metz's criticism

Metz's theory cannot be considered *new*. He tried to demonstrate that the orthodox, anti-subjectivist structuralist perspective could lead to a proper distinction between film structure and code, on one side, and the real spectator, on the other side. After all, the presence of a real spectator rather than a simulacrum is what justifies his studies in psychoanalysis. Consequently, Metz does not criticise every definition of enunciation. On the contrary, in the very beginning of his book he references the notion of enunciation as production and transition from a virtual instance (the code) to a real one, as proposed by Greimas and Courtés (1979). Metz's purpose is to eliminate the subject. He is aware that scholars have posited that enun-

ciation does not summon a full and a transcendental subject; however, he defines these kinds of disclaimers as "conventional":

> The locations of enunciation itself – enunciation that we are told is purely textual – are nonetheless most often conceived of as people of some sort. We have to admit that we cannot think of them otherwise; we cannot represent them otherwise clearly, except as instances of incarnation (Metz 1991: 3–4).

Metz's book did not bring about a return to structuralism. Indeed, Bettetini (1996: 55) noted that Metz's radical position is distinguished by a focus on the empirical spectator, considered as a subject. This stance opens up theory to other insights deriving from pragmatics and speech act theory, without forms of mediation. In the English translation of Casetti (1986), the author writes:

> In the years following the publication of this book in Italian, I continued working on enunciation, but I also tried to look at the spectator from the perspective of the actual, material mechanics of reception. In several studies, employing ethnographic and "life-story" methodology, I have engaged issues (such as gender) that were purposely kept in the background of Inside the Gaze (Casetti 1986: XVII).

In what follows, an example of the two different points of view on enunciation (impersonal and anthropoid) is provided (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Stanley Kubrick's 2001 *A Space Odyssey*, screenshot from the film. For less than one second, the two hostesses smile at the camera. Actually, they look at a sleeping passenger, but it is impossible for the viewer not to be installed and embodied in the movie. It is a good example of Casetti's interpellation to the enunciatee: "them and I (scil. the enunciator), we gaze at you". However, adopting Metz and Paolucci's notion of impersonal enunciation, the only relevant point in the considered example is the unveiling of the technical device (looking into the device) associated to other marks of the enunciation, e.g. the frame within a frame. The comparison between the two notions of enunciation illustrates Basso's distinction between a semiotics of the technical apparatus (camera, microphone, keyboard …), and a semiotics which is interested in the transformation of values, implying a subject-like instance to which value has a value.

2.6 Re-opening the debate on enunciation

Concern for the "real" spectator can still be considered a pole characteris-
ing the position of Italian semiotics scholars. In some cases, however, this
focus led some prominent scholars to abandon film semiotics. For this rea-
son, the third generation of Italian semiotic scholars re-opened the debate
on enunciation, starting from an important outline of the genesis of the con-
cept and the development of the debate by Giovanni Manetti (2008). We will
focus mainly on two researchers: Pierluigi Basso and Claudio Paolucci.
Basso has been the president of the *French Association of Semiotics* (ASF)
and, when he was still living and working in Italy, he collaborated with Paolo
Fabbri. Of his many monographic studies dedicated to film semiotics, his
work on David Lynch's cinema stands out (Basso 2006). Basso (2003: 60–63)
considers *La Région Centrale*, a 1971 experimental Canadian film directed
by Michael Snow. The movie is 180 minutes long and consists of 17 shots
of an uninhabited mountainous landscape produced by a pre-programmed
robotic arm. The film does not include any human elements. The camera's
turns and rollovers are alien to common perceptive experience:

> The impersonal enunciation characterising *La région céntrale* seems to put on
> stage a purely inter-objective dimension between the gaze of a machine and a
> landscape devoid of anthropic values (Basso 2003: 62).

Any attempt to read the movements of the gaze as anthropic is neutralised.
By contrast, therefore, it is possible to infer from the movie the affective and
cognitive values characterising the intersection between the anthropic gaze
and the world. In particular, the movie lacks narrativity in that it does not
depict any transformations. Its meaning reminds Basso of instrumental
music: a pure semiotics of experience, a trial for the body of the spectator.
However, the anthropic values usually associated with enunciation can only
be neutralised on a local scale and through specific discursive choices
(Basso 2003: 89–99). Basso agrees with Metz that enunciation is to be con-
sidered impersonal, but he also reminds us that "personal" does not coin-
cide with "subjective". Metz focused on the technical functionality of the
cinematographic apparatus. On the contrary, enunciation cannot be sepa-
rated from the transformation of values, and such transformation can only
be carried out by an instance on the part of the subject. Furthermore, the
non-coincidence between the competence of the subject of enunciation
and the spectator is the main reason for the internal division of the cine-
matographic text into two enunciational figures, namely the enunciator and
enunciate. Basso's argument is proposed as part of an effort to re-articu-
late the generative and phenomenological perspectives with the cine-
matographic text (*ivi:* 74).

  Unlike Basso, Claudio Paolucci (2020) re-evaluates the notion of imper-
sonal enunciation. Paolucci is a full professor of semiotics at Bologna Uni-
versity. Although he is considered a prominent disciple of Umberto Eco, on

this subject he has abandoned the pragmatist research paradigm to converge with Metz's views. However, it would be reductive to limit Paolucci's theoretical proposal to the field of film semiotics; rather, Metz's theory of impersonal enunciation serves to propose a general, unified notion of enunciation based on the category of "non-person" (Paolucci 2020: 39) appropriate for various contexts such as digital technologies and big data (*ivi:* 165–166). Paolucci also refers to Gabriele Marino (2020), a promising scholar in music semiotics who had proposed a theory of impersonal enunciation for "the phonographic frame" and "listening point", and defined enunciation as the "place of the record", paraphrasing Metz. At the same time, Paolucci justifies the presence of subjectivity as an e f f e c t . To this end, Paolucci adopts Greimas's definition of enunciation:

> We prefer to speak of intentionality, which we interpret as a vision of the world, as an oriented, transitive relation owing to which the subject constitutes the world as an object while constituting it thereby (Greimas and Courtés 1979: 104).

However, Paolucci notes that Greimas's formulation sounds idealistic in that the subject constructs the statement through an act of his own while constructing himself at the same time. For this reason, Paolucci proposes what he calls an "ergative model", according to which the act of enunciation does not imply a causal intentionality on the part of the subject (Paolucci 2020: 154). Unfortunately, the examples provided by the author to illustrate the deep level of his model on the basis of which subjectivity is produced, are practically impossible to translate into English since it lacks an equivalent of the Italian particle *si* (*"la pasta si cuoce"* – "the pasta cooks"). A better example might perhaps be provided by some deponent verbs in Latin such as *sequor*, a verb that is active but is conjugated in the passive voice and does not involve the subject's intentionality (e.g. *quo fata trahunt retrahuntque, sequamur* – "where the Fates drag us and drag us back, let us follow"). It would perhaps be clearer to adopt a different definition, the one proposed by Francesco Marsciani (2012b: 120) and quoted by Paolocci himself: "Subjectivity and objectivity are mutually constituted in language, through a *debrayage* operation". Unlike Paolucci, however, Marsciani does not place the subject at the origins of the process. For Marsciani it is instead *intersubjectivity*, considered as a condition of possibility of meaning, that gives rise to this process.

To return to film semiotics, Paolucci finds that his "ergative" point of view outdates the opposition between Metz and Casetti. For example, Metz is puzzled by the fact that, from the anthropoid point of view on enunciation, the viewer sometimes occupies both the "I" and "you" positions in the movie at the same time.

> For my theory of enunciation, this situation is absolutely natural and expected: filmic language defines two subject positions in the place of the enunciator, whereas other languages have only one (Paolucci 2020: 292).

Paolucci does not quote Basso (2003) neither does he respond to the latter's criticism about the risks surrounding impersonal enunciation, in particular the self-referentiality of the text when it is artificially disentangled from the viewer, the non-coincidence between "person" and "subject", and the fact that impersonal enunciation depends entirely on the technical devices used to produce the document. And indeed, the technical ability to record sound with different audio resolutions seems crucial in Paolucci's (2020: 299–307) analysis of *Wish you were here* as well. However, Paolucci does not agree with the option of reducing the enunciation dispositive to the enunciative practices, proposed, *inter alia*, by Basso (2016), preferring instead to define it in terms of Hjelmslev's schema. Paolucci (2020: 333) quotes Basso (2013: 378), agreeing with his prosthetic and not simulacral notion of enunciation and noting that the avatar in video games is more of a technological prosthesis enhancing the player's abilities than the image of an external subject.

3.   Another change of paradigm

Pierluigi Basso and Claudio Paolucci belong to a third generation of Italian semiotics scholars whose research began at the turn of the Millennium. While the second generation was interested in the pragmatic effects of movies on spectators and used Greimas's theory exclusively for this purpose, a number of scholars in the new generation launched new, original research on the basis of Greimas's framework. As Nicola Dusi (2014: 13–15) writes, Metz's synthesis on film enunciation and reflexivity closed that important debate. Subsequently, the pragmatic approach widened its scope to also encompass the context of reception, including the spectator's knowledge and memory, as well as historical and sociological considerations. Post-structural semiotics became interested in sociosemiotics. One key factor behind this new turn was the move by Italian universities to offer new degree courses in communication science. Beginning in the late 1990s and on the initiative of Umberto Eco, semioticians started working with sociologists and psychologists, and in some cases this collaboration generated interesting transdisciplinary relations, pushing semiotics to re-discuss its own purposes and case studies.

     In this framework, the approach of the Greimas school began to enjoy new popularity. One of the problems in the early Italian reception of Greimas's theory during the 1970s was a misunderstanding of its purpose. Indeed, this theory is often mistakenly viewed as a narratological model of fictional texts, in the sense that fiction could be opposed, for example, to non-fiction. A second misunderstanding concerns the notion of "text". However, "text" should not be confused with the "document" or "support", as it is instead the result of an analysis carried out on a s i g n i f i c a n t s e t – see Marrone (2010a). In other words, texts cannot be opposed to practices, as has often been erroneously suggested even among Greimas's epi-

gones. In line with semiotics, Greimas's theory is an inquiry into the conditions of possibility of signification, hermeneutics, and ethnology. It strives to serve as a science of signification or an epistemology for human sciences – see Marsciani (2012a). Having not fully understood its nature, scholars have sometimes used Greimas's model as a sort of grid to produce 'cookie cutter' literary, musical, and film critiques, as Umberto Eco used to say (personal communication). From the 1980s onwards, therefore, research had focused on other problems. This focus changed with the rediscovery of the notion of semiotic translation, a notion that will be presented in the next section. In particular, according to Ruggero Eugeni (2008), one of the protagonists of the new phase, a debate on the semiotic notion of text emerged in the 1990s involving three different positions:

- Radical anti-textualism, according to which the textual model imposes limits on the analysis of filmic experience and should be abandoned.
- Post-textualism, according to which films are characterised by "weak textuality": they are "concrete objects" (Dusi 2014: 27), a texture of perceptual fragments that the researcher should examine as modulations and trends of experience. Ruggero Eugeni, one of the most prominent Italian researchers in film semiotics, endorses this position. Eugeni (2010) has authored many important publications, one of which was awarded the Limina prize for being the "best Italian book on film studies". In search of the spectator's experience, his research often makes use of neurocognitive data. According to Eugeni (2015), we have entered a post-media era in which media are dissolved into apparatuses of commerce, control, combat, play, travel and relationship, and meaning must be recomposed by epic narratives such as the naturalisation of technology, the subjectivation of experience, and the socialisation of relational bonds. Other contributions by Eugeni to film semiotics will be presented below.
- Neo-textualism, according to which the new research paradigm on sensibility, emotions, and experience widens the field in which textual semiotic instruments can be applied with the aim of mapping the peculiar micro-semantic universe of the movie. The key authors in this field include Gianfranco Marrone (2010b), Francesco Marsciani (2012a), and Nicola Dusi (2014).

3.1 Intersemiotic translation

Originally proposed by Roman Jakobson (1959), the notion of intersemiotic translation was re-discussed at the semiotics graduate seminars held at the University of Bologna between 1997 and 1999. The proceedings of these seminars have been collected in a monographic issue of the journal

Versus edited by Nicola Dusi and Siri Neergard (eds. 2000). An English presentation of the debate is published in Dusi (2015a). The seminars were attended by leading figures of the field, including Umberto Eco, Paolo Fabbri and Omar Calabrese. This notion proved to be highly fertile, giving rise to various publications focused on the relationship between cinema and literature (Francis Vanoye, Gian Paolo Caprettini, André Halbo) as well as music semiotics (Luca Marconi, Lucio Spaziante). The debate focused on two opposing theoretical stances. The first involved interpreting the notion of translation in light of interpretation, in line with Jakobson's original definition: "Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems" (1959: 261). The second entailed redefining intersemiotic translation in light of an approach to text modelled after Hjelmslev's work:

> Intersemiotic translation can provisionally be said to take place when there is a re-presentation, in one or more semiotic systems with a different purport and substances of expression, of a form of the content intersubjectively recognized as being linked, at one or more levels of pertinence, to the form of the content of a source text (Dusi 2015a: 248).

According to Dusi, translation is not a mechanical re-presentation of the elements comprising the departure or source text; rather, it implies r e s h a p - i n g the relationships between expression and the level of content, given that both the source and target of this process are often aesthetic texts.

Umberto Eco endorsed the first position. According to Eco, intersemiotic translation cannot be an adaptation because it transforms the source text by making explicit what had remained unsaid, revealing an image or placing a point of view, in contrast to novels with their tendency to undecidability. For example, in Moby Dick

> the account takes care to inform us that Ahab had only one leg, but, as far as I remember, it does not say which, leaving us free to use our imagination (Eco 1997: 326).

During the seminar, Eco noted that, when adapting the story for film (1956), John Huston and Ray Bradbury decided to s h o w the peg leg and so chose the left one. The question posed by Dusi (2003: IX) is: does this decision change the meaning of Melville's novel? Eco published a collection of essays on translation theory in support of this latter position (Eco 2003).

3.2 Semiotic translation and intermediality

Both of these positions focused on the problem of selecting the invariants and the specificities of the different substances and matters of the expression under investigation, since many analyses presented during the seminar focused not on translations that had been carried out, but on the pro-

cess of translation (Dusi 2003: 161). The notion of intersemiotic translation thus proved quite useful for exploring the phenomenon of intermediality, which was, in that period, a relatively new field of research and the source of many questions and problems. The definition of intersemiotic translation is analytically more precise and functional when compared to the vague and multi-faceted definition of intermediality. In fact, the word "intermediality" can refer to medial transposition as well as the combination of media in syncretic (i.e. multi-planar) semiotics such as film, comic books, and opera. Finally, it can be used as an i n t e r m e d i a l   r e f e r e n c e, that is, as the imitation of techniques used in different semiotics: for example, when a movie displays artworks (Dusi 2015b: 20). Federico Zecca (2013) has recently returned to semiotic translation, generalising it to encompass intermedial translation whenever it is possible to identify a source-text, an outcome-text, and a certain number of intersemiotic passages. Intermedial translation can involve a whole text or a partial section of a larger text.

3.3 The intermedial character's passions

This focus on the intersemiotic translation process generated important insights on intermediality. For example, Gianfranco Marrone (2003) analyses the different intermedial transformations of the popular inspector Montalbano character from literature to TV movies. The author reconstructs a hierarchy of media in which television occupies a dominant position. Marrone (2010b) focuses on the body and analyses the way it is articulated in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and Stanley Kubrick's movie adaptation (1971). Marrone's attention to the body and its rhetorical and figurative representation, as well as the impact of these representations on passions and the overall intelligibility of the text, follows the same line of inquiry developed by a French tradition rooted in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, undoubtedly one of the phenomenological foundations of semiotics, and subsequently interpreted by Greimas (Dusi 2014: 24–26).

According to Paolo Bertetti (2011: 8–9), Marrone's work opened a new sociosemiotic perspective on the intertextual construction of the "character":

> In other terms, the character is a sociosemiotic construction resulting not from a single text, but from a web of intertextual references. Thus [...] from the set of texts and interpretive discourses relative to the character in question, and in particular – at least in the case of some characters, in particular serial characters – from the set of the texts, by one or more authors, which recall, modify and translate the character, in the same medium or in other media (Bertetti 2011: 9).

In the same vein, Bertetti dedicated an exemplary (and very enjoyable) book to the metamorphoses of Conan, the popular character of Robert Howard's short stories, as he moves through novels, apocripha, comic books, cinema, and video games. This book also features a very useful the-

oretical chapter on the notion of character in semiotics that proposes a practical grid for analysis (Bertetti 2011: 13–44).

3.4 Perspectives

As the notion of intersemiotic translation attests, the Italian debate on intermediality had retained its own originality and enjoyed an early development that led the scientific community to take into account phenomena such as remixing and remaking, interpreted as p r a c t i c e s   o f   r e p l i c a b i l i t y. An important symposium on this subject was held in Urbino in 2004 as part of the traditional semiotics seminars organised by the *International Centre of Semiotics and Linguistics*. As evidenced by the volume publishing the proceedings, edited by Dusi and Spaziante (eds. 2006), a distinguished part of the semiotics scientific community participated in the seminar: Ruggero Eugeni, Daniele Barbieri, Luca Marconi, Allan Moore, Maria Pia Pozzato, Marco Senaldi, Guido Ferraro, Francis Vanoye, Cristina Demaria, Antonella Mascio, Giorgio Grignaffini, Gianfranco Marrone, and many others. Another consequence of the attention to intermediality and semiotic translation has been the research on the stratification of different semiotic planes and syncretic semiotics, and indeed this was the focus of an important symposium of the *Italian Association of Semiotic Studies* (AISS) chaired by Maria Pia Pozzato (Pozzato and Spaziante 2010). Many Italian scholars have also worked on themes and problems related to the international debate, such as t r a n s m e d i a l i t y : one profound interpreter of this issue is Paolo Bertetti (2020). Together with intermediality and new media, new objects of study closely related to film have also been analysed such as, for example, series (Attimonelli and Susca 2020) and cultural icons (Bernardelli and Grillo eds. 2020). Italian research on these subjects developed prior to the international debate in some respects. However, it is worth noting another important shift in the vector orienting Italian culture towards other interlocutors: Italian semiotics was born when this vector rotated from Germany to France, or from idealism to structuralism, and later to Anglo-Saxon pragmatics. French post-structuralism remains central to current discussions: Gilles Deleuze's work has been used by Paolo Fabbri (2019) to re-read Federico Fellini's cinema by considering books, comics, scripts, drawings, photograms and music. At the turn of the Millennium, the orientation vector was extended to include mediologic work such as that of Lev Manovich (2001) and Henry Jenkins (2006). Another important reference point over the last 20 years has been Juri M. Lotman, whose semiotics of culture seems to bring together different approaches circulating in current Italian debates.

Nowadays, a new semiotic generation has emerged in Italy, and it is difficult to guess the direction the next turn will take. Quite interestingly, after research on intermediality, young scholars have gone back to recognising the vitality and anti-ideological usefulness of film semiotics. Without forget-

ting new media, they have returned to focus on movies, following Slavoj Žižek's example, and trying to read the history of culture through screen surfaces (Surace 2018: 800). Recently, Bruno Surace dedicated an interesting volume to the problem of destinality in cinematographic texts (*ibidem*). D e s t i n a l i t y is defined as the textual manifestation of a transcendent sender of semantic values; the category of destinality thus acts before the text means something, as a widespread instance that tells us why the text is meaning (Surace 2019: 43).

3.5 New media research and video game semiotics

Bettetini's seminal work on interactivity, presented above, was further developed by Giovanna Cosenza (ed. 2003). Eco's research on interpretive cooperation was extended to video games by Massimo Maietti (2004), while Francesco Galofaro (2003) proposed the notion of meta-direction: in first- and third-person shooter video games some features of film direction are delegated to the user, while it is possible to recognise a hierarchically superior instance that decides the functions that can be delegated to the player. An important comparison between the cinematographic subjective shot and the first-person point of view in video games has been proposed by Ruggero Eugeni, according to which the c o r e - s e l f emerging from the elementary subjective experience is then narratively developed through a continuous and coherent process of unfolding (Eugeni 2012: 28).

From the turn of the Millennium onwards, early ideas about interaction, focused on humans and machines in video game research were flanked by new studies focused on the interaction between humans in virtual environments. This latter body of work seeks to distinguish video games from the model of the hypertext (Ferri 2007) and has contributed to the problematisation of the notion of "human", as well as posing considerations about the body that merge semiotics and gender theory (Demaria and Mascio 2000). It is important to underline that, over the last 20 years, video game semiotics has gradually detached itself from film semiotics in terms of its methodologies and problems, moving towards an autonomous videoludic critique (Compagno 2012), interaction design (Zinna 2004; Diamanti 2012), and design and gamification (Caliri et al. eds. 2018). Finally, Ruggero Eugeni (2021) has extended the post-medial perspective introduced above to the case-study represented by new technologies such as smart glasses, night vision goggles, augmented reality, and neural networks.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, some features of Italian film semiotics have remained constant over the decades. The first of these is the discipline's dialectic development through significant long-lasting debates on specific themes

(such as the film system, pragmatic effects on the spectator, enunciation, intermediality and "new" media) and intergenerational discussions. Some classic authors, such as Umberto Eco and Gianfranco Bettetini, were able to orient the debate in different epochs. Second, all of these Italian semiotic traditions frame the meaning of film in a broader context, sociosemiotic in the case of the textualist and narratological approaches and more experience-oriented in the case of neurophenomenological approaches. However, as outlined above, phenomenology is to be considered a foundational element of textualist approaches leading to very interesting research such as Pierluigi Basso's work on amnesia in movies such as Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) (Basso 2003: 283–316).

The third feature is cross-fertilisation. Semioticians have avoided specialising in "film theory" and indeed every attempt to distinguish between general semiotics theory and the specific semiotics of movies, music, and theatre has proven fruitless. On the contrary, many semioticians have contributed to film research without dedicating themselves to it full time, and, at the same time, many film semioticians have contributed to pioneering research in other fields, from algorithms to augmented reality. Finally, film semiotics is part of Italian culture. If we join Lotman in considering culture to be a model of the world, we can see that gradual changes in the border between the internal and external space have periodically redefined and re-oriented the semiotics debate.

Notes

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Filmography

2001 A Space Odyssey (USA 1968, director: Stanley Kubrick).
A Clockwork Orange (USA 1971, director: Stanley Kubrick).
Memento (USA, 2000, director: Christopher Nolan).
Moby Dick (USA 1956, director: John Huston).

Image sources

Fig. 2. The semiotic square generating enunciational relations (Casetti 1986: 53).
Fig. 3. Stanley Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey*, screenshot from the film.

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