

A Re-reading of Christian Metz's “Grande Syntagmatique” Through the Concept of “Exception”

– the example of alternation in *Thelma & Louise* (1991)

Fabien Carpentras

Recent film studies, with the use of concepts like Average Shot Length (ASL) and “Classical Editing”, have fostered thinking on the “general” rather than on the “particular”, giving priority to the identification of common features reproducible in different contexts rather than to the “specific” and its irreproducibility. If these approaches have permitted a better comprehension of how film styles evolve and dynamically affect the perception of the viewer, they nonetheless tend to dismiss and ignore any “exception” which does not fit the general pattern. We argue that the “Grande Syntagmatique” as originally theorized by Christian Metz in 1966, though at first sight an attempt to isolate the basic “grammatical” units composing a filmic text, constitutes in fact the beginning of a reflection on the “specific” and the “particular” at the level of the syntagmatic chain. Through the introduction of notions like “Exception” and “Second Text” (advanced respectively by Slavoj Žižek and Louis Althusser), the present paper aims at reinterpreting some key aspects of the “Grande Syntagmatique” in terms of the “particular”, giving to this ambitious theoretical construct a new impulse in an age where, despite profound and irreversible changes, cinema is still not sufficiently problematized in its relation to History as a whole.

Keywords: Grande Syntagmatique, Christian Metz, Exception, *Thelma & Louise*, Slavoj Žižek

Introduction:

Why a Re-reading through the Concept of “Exception”?

Originally published in 1966 in *Communications*, Christian Metz renowned “Grande Syntagmatique” has been since its inception both the object of profound skepticism and high consideration, giving birth to an important array of comments and theoretical writings¹. Whatever one’s position regarding Metz’s classification of cinematic “codes”, one indeed cannot but acknowledge its central importance to film studies for triggering a profound and still ongoing reflection on the object called “cinema”, as well as a questioning of its ontological status. It remains undoubtedly one of the most quoted and debated achievement in the history of film theory. However, the fact that the “Grande Syntagmatique” has generally been addressed in a rather distorted way, i.e. not as the rich and paradoxical construction it was in 1966 but as an impoverished and simplified version of it, is a point far less discussed in academic circles. Indeed, there is a strong tendency to consider the Metzian framework primarily in its formalist and positivist features, as an ambitious yet unrealistic construct to identify the ‘ultimate’ filmic code. Suffice it to recall the analysis of *Gigi* by Raymond Bellour, one of the best studies building on the “Grande Syntagmatique” published to this day². From the very beginning of his text, the French critic feels the need to acknowledge the lacks and outdated aspects of the Metzian categories, as if keeping his distance from them was a prerequisite for a serious study relying upon them: if his work is still indebted to the “Grande Syntagmatique”, it does so at the expense of the *singularity* of the latter through the introduction of new general categories (“supra-segmental”, “sub-segmental”, etc.). Bellour’s approach, whose main objective was to bring to light general patterns of rhythm and repetition in the narrative economy of the classical film – and not proposing a new and expanded model – remains however closely akin to Metz’s initial impulse, and as such cannot be truly considered a “re-reading”. This is not the case of subsequent works drawing on the “Grande Syntagmatique”, which all regard the original eight segmental types as insufficient and too limitative in their range, thus requiring a transformative and reworking process. This task has been carried out by a broad range of approaches, mainly influenced mainly by cognitive sciences, generative grammar, pragmatics, and more recently multimodality³. It must be stressed that these works have been essential in renewing the debates surrounding the failures and successes of Metz’s original theoretical framework, thus keeping alive the interest of the academic

field toward a construct which would otherwise have been forgotten or simply remembered as a “structuralist” curiosity of the past. The present paper is particularly indebted to researches carried out in France in the field of semiology by Dominique Chateau and Roger Odin. That said, we would like to stress that all these theoretical and formal transformations have been carried out at the expense of the ambiguous dimension of the original segmentation, losing in the process all the variety and the contradictory richness which pervaded the syntagmatic reading of *Adieu Philippine*. For instance, no one remembers and uses today a concept like “montage with effect” [*montage sec à effets*]. Like many other concepts developed by Metz, this new appellation regarding a very particular kind of cut/transition between segments was not just about classification *per se* or the expression of a willingness to identify abstract transitional units, but pointed implicitly toward the existence of *exceptional* features transcending the ‘generic meaning’ of a given technique at the level of the signifier⁴. Michel Colin’s reworking of this category from the perspective of transformational generative grammar is quite symptomatic of the fate reserved to the ambiguous and contradictory aspects of the “Grande Syntagmatique” in its subsequent re-readings. For Colin, the use of punctuation marks such as “montage with effect” or dissolve in order to delineate segments overtly conflicts with the reading based on the identification of syntagmatic types – what he calls the “deductive” or “top-down” method⁵. In order to prevent confusion and contradiction between both readings, Colin proposes to create a second table reserved for the “Autonomous Segment”, with two terminal nodes composed of “Syntagma” and “Autonomous Shot”. In so doing, he is not only able to resolve the contradictory aspects of the original “Autonomous Shot” – which, let us recall, included the sequence shot and four different types of insert, and as such could easily be confused with a syntagma –, he also decisively shifts the focus of attention from the *irregularities* to the *regularities* of the filmic text. Indeed, in his re-reading, segment 3 which was originally considered a “Scene” introduced by a “montage with effect” now appears to be divided into two pieces, respectively an “Ordinary Sequence” and a “Scene”, the rhetorical dimension associated with the “montage with effect” being *de facto* ignored. From the logical standpoint of the “deductive method” this new categorization is accurate and permits to clarify on a more rational ground the table of the “Grande Syntagmatique”, but at the same time it reduces the “montage with effect” to a mere “cut”, thus erasing its very particular nature in regards of the whole sequence.

As has already been stressed by different commentators of the “Grande Syntagmatique” – including Colin –, Metz was in fact well aware of the existence of two mutually exclusive readings in his definition of the “Autonomous Segment”, and he assumed that the construction of a second table would probably be necessary in the near future⁶. However, there are good reasons to believe that the theorist never meant a re-reading along the lines defined by Noam Chomsky in his model of the generative grammar, nor that he perceived the contradictory aspects of his “Grande Syntagmatique” as a real problem. This is of course evident in the fact that he never managed to propose a freshly updated version of his table of the “Grande Syntagmatique”, but also more specifically – at the level of the problem which interests us here – in the fact that far from considering the “montage with effect” as a mere punctuation mark (like a cut, or in some cases a dissolve, a fade-out, etc.), he was on the contrary acutely aware of the rupture the latter represented in regards of the signifying chain:

There is a surprising, deliberate absence of any punctuational signifier at a point along the filmic chain where one can expect to find one (for example, between two segments very different from each other in subject or in tone) – the consequence of which is to release a very marked punctuational significata (emphasis by zero sign). One might call this type of montage, in contrast to ordinary montage, montage with effect. It is the filmic equivalent of the asyndeton⁷.

Metz not only discusses the “montage with effect” as a strong punctuation mark, he also considers it a surprising and irregular dimension of the signifier – hence its name defined in opposition to *ordinary* montage, rather than using a pure neologism. This short quotation, more than bearing the traces of the contradictions of an incomplete theoretical construct, is on the contrary the manifestation of an approach driven by the sensibility to the particular, to the tiniest and nearly imperceptible variations between the segments composing a filmic text⁸. Thus when Colin deems reasonable to divide segment 3 into two separate syntagmas, reducing all the disparities and irregularities that one may encounter at the level of the syntagmatic chain to *mere equivalents*, he is in a sense betraying the theoretical movement which motivated the original “Grande Syntagmatique”. This tendency toward generalization is even more pronounced in Chateau and Odin, where any autonomous segment when

actualized in a particular filmic context remains also the equivalent of the other, which means that the order of their occurrence in regards to the narrative becomes of no importance whatsoever. To put it bluntly, it does not matter if a scene depicting (for instance) the decisive heartbreak of the heroine in a love comedy is signified through the “Ordinary Sequence”, the “Parallel Syntagma” or the “Autonomous shot”: they are all interchangeable options with no privileged position in the signifying chain. The filmic discourse is thus regarded as a transparent, sanitized structure freed from any internal constraint and pressure. This theoretical assumption is perfectly summed up in Chateau’s following assertion that

[...] “vertical” restrictions which may limit each successive selection are not related to any determined paradigmatic classification; in the last instance, when a shot has been chosen with the status E_i , its next appearance as E_{i+1} is bound to an *infinity* of possibilities of shots⁹.

Metz’s point was, on the contrary, that the possibilities of associations between different segments are *always actualized* and, as such, very finite¹⁰. Indeed, though from the safe standpoint of an abstract theoretical construction – in this case, the ideal moment when the shots are about to be selected and organized – shot E_{i+1} may seem to be bound to an infinity of possibilities, this is not the case of the ‘actualized’ form of E_{i+1} , whose position in the signifying chain and relation to the narrative is “overdetermined” by the overall discursive structure¹¹. The main reason why Christian Metz’s analysis of *Adieu Philippe* remains fascinating and inspiring for so many researchers and students today, does not lie in its “positivist” or “formalist” features, but rather in its success for catching with an incomparable acuity and precision, almost in a dialectical manner, two apparently unrelated and conflicting domains: the *particular* and the *general*. This is why we believe the original “Grande Syntagmatique” fairly suited for a dialectical reading based upon the concept of *exception*.

Before moving forward, we nonetheless need to address and specify another apparent contradiction, or the reason which led us to choose a “hard” theoretical construct like the “Grande Syntagmatique” rather than a more flexible model (like, for instance, multimodality). The re-readings mentioned above all directly or indirectly stem from a movement of reaction initiated in the 80s against what we may broadly call “structuralism”. This is obvious in Chateau, where the “code” is reduced to a semiological condition upon which

super-structural rules exert pressure, the filmic sequence being as a matter of fact freed from all internal constraint. The advantage of such an approach is to introduce dynamism in an otherwise static construct and in its capacity to account for filmic forms yet to be invented: in one word, it is the introduction of the diachronic dimension in a model primarily elaborated from narrative cinema of the 60s. We would like to make the proposition that the diachronic scale introduced in models influenced by generative grammar, pragmatics, or cognitive sciences, in reality is a *false* one, in the sense that behind the apparent overthrowing of the old structure lurks another structure or model, more concealed and elusive this time. Indeed, the movement toward generalization which inhabits the majority of these approaches automatically homogenizes and flattens differences, emphasizing continuities over discrepancies, and as such give the illusion of a stable and universal Whole. In this sense, it remains similar to “structuralism”. This tendency is all the more obvious in David Bordwell’s treatment of film styles, where transformations and innovations are systematically defined in their relation to the general frame of classical narrative films, not in their own heterogeneity. For instance, the sudden flourishing in the 90s of what Bordwell calls “network narratives” is denied the status of rupture or profound change in cinema history, being reduced to a mere variation of classical editing and goal-oriented narratives¹². A re-reading along the lines of the “Grande Syntagmatique” and the concept of “exception” would teach us that “network narratives” do represent a rupture in regards of classical narrative norms, and that the abnormally violent event – car accident, shooting, rape, etc. – which triggers the interweaving of parallel stories may in fact constitute the inverted form of the otherwise very ordinary and alienated existence of the characters – *Babel* (2006) being of course a paradigmatic example. If one does not want to fall into mere empiricism (which Metz’s analysis of *Adieu Philippine* is not), one thus needs a structure firm enough to underline continuities, and pervasive enough to highlight what we will shortly define as “exception”. The concept of “exception” being, by definition, antithetic to any structure or model, it will provide the necessary counterpoint for a dialectical reading which enables us to grasp particularities *in* totalities, or ruptures *in* continuities. This task will be tackled in the present paper at the level of a single text analysis – through the example of Ridley Scott’s controversial *Thelma & Louise* (1991). An analysis at the level of film styles, through the example of “network narratives”, will be provided in the future.

1. The Concept of “Exception” in Cinema

In the introduction to his study of Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieślowski, Slavoj Žižek develops an insightful reading of Hegelian dialectics as the act of “being able to pick out the exceptional singular case¹³”. That is to say, when one faces a series of related elements in a given film (or a series of films, thematics, techniques, etc.), he/she should always look for the *exception* in order to attain the true ‘universal’ character of the object studied. The Slovenian philosopher takes as an example the first Perry Mason novel (*The Case of the Velvet Claws*, published in 1933), which features elements of the hardboiled universe against a standard logic-and-deduction formula. What may appear at first glance as a ‘weak’ or contradictory whodunit structure reveals itself, under the scope of dialectics, as a violent gesture to establish a new genre: the author Erle Stanley Gardner just couldn’t ignore the then ‘hegemonic’ genre of hardboiled fiction, and *had to* inscribe his work within it¹⁴. In other words, the element which due to its singularity may seem at first sight as trivial, insignificant and unimportant to a whodunit novels reader reveals in fact to be the most fundamental ingredient without which Perry Mason novels wouldn’t even exist... To take a more concrete and cinematic example, during the vision of a particular movie some elements are never to be ‘perceived’ as such by the viewer. These may be the way characters of a story settled in a foreign country all speak English fluently (*To Have and Have Not*, 1944), a subtle forward moving tracking shot to reframe in close up the face of the male character after a massive terrorist attack (*American Sniper*, 2015), or the presence of a fair and comprehensive (male) police investigator in an otherwise thoroughly ‘anti-masculinist’ universe (*Thelma & Louise*). The reason why these are not ‘perceived’ by the spectator is because they do not ‘actively’ participate in the construction of the fictional world, and are as such considered to be irrelevant to its comprehension. One should here bear in mind that we are dealing with a fundamentally different relationship than the cue/schemata one developed by David Bordwell in his cognitive model¹⁵. True, in a literal sense, the presence of the exceptional element is very well perceived by the viewer (i.e., he/she is perfectly aware that the characters express themselves in English and not French or Spanish, fully feels the dramatic effect added by the moving tracking shot, etc.); however, this presence is *never* tested at the level of hypothesis and remains safely removed from the process of interpretation. Why? For the very reason that this element, due to its exceptional character, represents a far too heterogeneous

item in regards to the series as a whole, and as such *cannot but* stay outside of the viewer's frame of perception: is not the use of English in a colony controlled by Vichy France *too natural* in the context of the US intervention in Europe? Not *American Sniper* built around the narrative of the father fighting for his wife and son, to which the momentary reframing on the sole Chris Kyle *cannot* bear no significance whatsoever? And the male police officer Hal Slocumb not *too exceptional* in regards to the overtly feminist agenda of *Thelma & Louise* to be perceived as a threat to the two female outlaws? As was the case with the Perry Mason novel, the "exception" we are dealing with here reveals itself more than a mere 'contradiction': it uncovers bluntly the hidden 'truth' of the narrative, the 'presuppositions' against and within which the text articulates itself so that it can emerge as discourse (and without which there would be no *American Sniper*, *Thelma & Louise*, etc.). Another recent appropriate example for dialectical analysis is the widely acclaimed box-office success *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015). As is known, Miller's film has been on the one hand praised for subverting traditional action movie codes with its conscious criticism of patriarchal structures, but also on the other accused of conveying a rather 'traditional' image of women for its use of highly eroticized young models... So where should we locate, to use Žižek's words, the 'universal' truth of the film? Is it a thoroughly feminist movie or a new masquerade of the traditional male gaze? Quite simply, by looking at the "exception" of the series structuring the film, that is, the character of Cheedo (one of Immortan Joe's five wives escaping the tyrant). Unlike her counterparts who mechanically follow Furiosa and would rather die than accept being held captive back again at the Citadel, Cheedo twice resists collective opinion by trying to escape and rejoin her former husband. In that, she is the true "exception" of a universe exclusively built around the idea of willingly and desperately fighting oppressed females: she stands for all the women who passively accepts to sacrifice their 'liberty' for a stable and secured life within the patriarchal order... What is of the greatest interest, however, is that this contradiction rather than being logically resolved as would any 'normal' plot devices, goes instead purely and simply negated towards the end of the movie, an absence which clearly marks this element as "exceptional". No explanations whatsoever are indeed judged necessary to Cheedo's failed escape attempts, as well as to her sudden change of mind when she finally decides to help Furiosa in her fight against Immortan Joe. So the proper dialectical answer to the question asked above is that *yes*, *Mad Max: Fury Road* is actually a 'feminist' movie, but as the "exception" to

the series shows, it is a movie which deals with a very exclusive kind of feminism: that is, a feminism whose conception of the 'liberated woman' relies exclusively on the figure of desirable, exposed young female bodies.

The shortest way to identify the "exception" of a given filmic text is to look, at the level of the signified, which item is overtly in conflict with the series structuring the world of the diegesis. However, the signifier does not remain neutral in the process and also plays at times a decisive role in shaping the "exceptionality" of the signified. The "montage with effect" mentioned earlier is a case in point. According to Metz, Rozier's film is primarily a 'documentary on modern life' and on how young people flirt, love, and talk to each other¹⁶. The impression of direct 'realism' and spontaneity which emanates from the movie, reminiscent of Direct Cinema, is of course a purely constructed one, an effect which the director managed to obtain through a long and painful production and editing process¹⁷. At the syntagmatic level, this results in the occurrence of three main types of autonomous segments: first the "Scene", whose coincidence between diegetic and 'screen' time is particularly qualified to convey the sense of immediacy and orality frequently associated with *Adieu Phillipine*; second, the "Ordinary Sequence", a segment representing 'only what it shows' but in a discontinuous way (eluding the 'unnecessary' moments of the diegetic time), thus being rather suited to express brief and concrete narrative evolutions (for example the decisive encounter between Michel, Liliane and Juliette which initiates the plotline); finally, the "Autonomous Shot", which not only brings percussion and rhythm to the overall structure but also participates, when manifesting itself as a sequence shot, in the sense of spontaneity and modernity outlined by Metz (see for example the segments numbered 21 and 33).

Adieu Phillipine is thus a movie about free love and frivolity, not about politics and Revolution, a status which is reflected directly in its syntagmatic chain – hence the absence of "Parallel Syntagmas" and the rather low number of occurrences of the "Alternate Syntagma". However, we need to keep in mind that it was produced during one of the most violent period of modern France history – the Algerian war, the massacre of October 17, 1961, etc. – and is fully imbedded in this context. Metz eludes it in his analysis, but the very first photogram of *Adieu Phillipine* is a title containing the words "1960, sixth year of the Algerian war". There is no sound supporting the image, just the simple mention of the Algerian war. This short introductory title then gives way to segment 1, a "Bracket Syntagma" representing unspecified scenes of work in a

television studio, this time supported by a cheerful and upbeat music. The viewer thus bounces from a specified and dramatic event – the Algerian war – to an unspecified and superficial event – the cheerful atmosphere of a given television studio. The result, independent of the two signified taken separately, is a soft and diffused melancholia which pervades the whole movie until its final conclusion. The “montage with effect” between segment 2 and 3 can be read as a repetition of this first pattern, as an “exception” which gives to the frivolity of the whole sequence its sense of sadness. At the level of the signified the characters lack psychological deepness – let us recall that Liliane and Juliette accepts to have a drink with Michel without even knowing his name or having introduced themselves, “just” because he invited them inside the television studio –, but this sense of lightness never develops fully, being constantly on the verge of dissolution in front of the tragic dimension cast by the shadow of the Algerian war. Let us for instance imagine, in the place of the “montage with effect” between segment 1 and 2, an “Ordinary Sequence” showing at length the three characters introducing themselves, chatting and babbling about their jobs, heartaches, etc. while heading for the bar: *Adieu Philippine* would appear as a completely different movie, much closer to the comedy genre than to the modern drama. By using the close-up of a juke-box just after an “Ordinary Sequence” where Michel and the girls have just met each other, Rozier not only eludes what happened in the meantime, but also subsumes the tragic background of the diegesis in the overtly light-hearted tone of the film. The Algerian war, never openly addressed but always lurking in the back of Michel, Liliane and Juliette, thus appears as the “exception” suturing the world of *Adieu Philippine*, the presence *qua* absence which gives the movie its distinctive sense of melancholia.

2. The “Second Text” as Manifestation of the “Exception”

The “exception” does not only represent the singular element in regards to which the series is constituted, it is also the locus where the ‘visible’ filmic text, weakening its bonds, threatens to collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions and tensions, thus liberating the potential for a radically *different* reading. Originally developed by the French philosopher Louis Althusser in his introduction to the collective work *Reading Capital*¹⁸, the concept of “Symptomatic Reading” stems from the Lacanian premise that any given text is always saying *something different* than what it is intended to say:

that is, it is always saying too little or too much, and this ‘too little’ or ‘too much’ is precisely the surplus which betrays the existence of a second, implicit text. To illustrate his concept, Althusser takes the example of the definition of the ‘value of labour’ as formulated by classical economics, which posits that ‘the value of labour is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of labour’¹⁹. As the philosopher sharply points out, this definition is paradoxical, the expression ‘reproduction of labour’ hinting in fact at the ‘labourer’ or worker. As Althusser puts it:

What is the reproduction of ‘labour’? The substitution of one word for another at the end of the answer: ‘labourer’ for ‘labour’, might seem to settle the question. *‘The value of labour is equal to the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the labourer’*. But as the labourer is not the labour the term at the end of the sentence now clashes with the term at the beginning: they do not have the same content and the equation cannot be made, for it is not the labourer who is bought for the wages, but his ‘labour’. And how are we to situate the first labour in the second term: ‘labourer’? In even uttering this sentence, therefore, precisely at the level of the term ‘labour’, at the beginning and end of the answer, there is something lacking, and this lack is strictly designated by the function of the terms themselves in the whole sentence²⁰.

The ‘lack’ which Althusser is referring to is the ‘invisible (yet) visible’ manifestation, the ‘presence *qua* absence’ of what he calls elsewhere the “Second Text”. In the present case, the classical definition is saying ‘too much’ in that it answers a question which is not directly posed, thus betraying the existence of an implicit and unuttered concept – the concept of *labour power* – against which the ‘first, literal text’ articulates/differentiates itself. We just saw that, in *Adieu Philippine*, it is against the Algerian war that the “First Text” articulates itself, never developing fully into a pure ‘romance film’ for this very reason.

It may seem at first sight paradoxical to bring together the “structuralist” concept of “Symptomatic Reading” and the dialectical one of “exception”, Althusser being notoriously known for his harsh criticism of Hegelian dialectics. However, does not the concept of “blank”, structuring what Althusser names the “First Text”, bear similarities with the one of “exception”? Is not classical economics, by surreptitiously replacing the term of “labourer”

by the one of “labour”, articulating its discourse against an item – the worker, its social class – overtly conflicting with the series of quantifiable labor – value, subsistence, goods, maintenance, reproduction, etc. – ? In fact, the concept of “Symptomatic Reading” is not new to film theory, having already been applied to John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) by Jean-Pierre Oudart and his fellow editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*²¹. In their original reading, the critics bring to light the “blank” against which Ford’s film articulates itself, that is the political nature of Lincoln. However, they never address this “lack” on the basis of the concept of “exception”, using instead a ‘meta-level’ textual analysis. The Althusserian notion of “Second Text” remains nonetheless perfectly fitted to tackle the problem of “exception” in regards to the “Grande Syntagmatique”. Indeed, what Althusser terms a “lack” or a “blank” is not exactly an absence, since it paradoxically needs to manifest itself to become effective. Hence, it is a presence *qua* absence or, to put it differently, the manifestation of an item which is both inside and outside the series. The word ‘labour’ stands both for the concept of ‘labour’ and that of ‘labourer’, the Algerian war is located simultaneously inside and outside the diegetic world – it is mentioned and ‘exists’, but never actually shown –, Cheedo is a young and beautiful girl similar in every aspect to the other female characters and yet accepts the patriarchal order, etc. Consequently, at the level of the signifier the “lack” will manifest itself as an ambiguous construct which inscribes the *signified* both inside and outside the series.

In that respect, *Thelma & Louise* is a textbook example. The “First Text” of Scott’s movie is built around the idea that modern society is ferociously patriarchal, that the murder of a rapist, though in self-defense, will never be forgiven, and as a consequence that the only way out is to escape. In normal life as well as in the diegetic world of the film – Thelma and Louise are in no way depicted as violent characters – the proper decision to take would be to go to the nearest police station and explain calmly what happened, that Harlan was trying to rape Thelma, that Louise had no other choice but to shoot him, etc. For their decision to go on the run to be justified, the whole society has to be depicted as their enemies. This is the “First Text”, as singled out by Althusser, *at its purest*. We can formulate it in the following sentence: “Why are you girls running away? Because all men are treacherous, violent and narcissistic”. However, from the standpoint of the “Symptomatic Reading”, the moment the two girls decide to run away is also the moment of the production of a *surplus*, of the deployment of very visible, easy-to-understand devices to justify their

choice (the use of bluntly stereotyped male characters, the depiction of Thelma as realizing her true inner self, etc.). In other words, the moment the “First Text” is settled up in an unambiguous manner is also the moment when the film starts to say ‘too much’ or ‘too little’. As was the case with the ‘value of labour’ in classical economics, this ‘too much’ changes surreptitiously the equilibrium of the equation, revealing a “blank” against which the filmic text is implicitly articulating itself. Indeed, Scott’s film is characterized, as already mentioned, by the presence of a thoroughly comprehensive male police officer, who deeply identifies with Louise and tries everything to save the two outlaws²². From the standpoint of the “First Text”, this presence is an incongruous one since it bluntly contradicts the stereotyped and negative embodiment of masculinity which gives the whole movie its justification: if ‘good’ men like Hal Slocumb do exist, then the reason for running away does not stand any more. Thus, the presence of the character played by Harvey Keitel reveals itself to be an answer to a question which was ‘not posed’ at the level of the “First Text”. We can reformulate it the following way: “Why are you girls running away, if all men are treacherous, violent and narcissistic except the police officer in charge of your case?” To which the answer would be: “Because we have too.” Slocumb thus embodies a “blank” in regards of the “First Text”, revealing the real motive behind the escape: *emptiness*. The vacuum on which is built the feminist agenda of *Thelma & Louise* is all the more manifest toward the end of the movie when Louise gives Slocumb a last phone call: the police officer confesses that he knows what has happened to her in Texas, thus removing the last explanation – Louise’s traumatic past being the main cause of her mistrust of justice – of their escape to Mexico. Neither Thelma, nor the audience, are acknowledged what has happened to her. As a consequence, Slocumb does not only appear as an “exception” because of his comprehensive and kind attitude toward females, but also and especially because he knows the girls *better than they know themselves*. As such, he is resolutely outside of the patriarchal world of the film.

The whole point, however, is that the character of Slocumb is not a woman but *a man*, and that he does not represent crime and disorder but precisely law and order. As such, he is not the equal of the two girls, always staying at a safe distance, knowing them at once very intimately and yet never fully engaged at their side. The use of slow motion in the last sequence, when he desperately tries to save Thelma and Louise from certain death, can thus be read as a metaphorical device to *slow him down* in order to preserve the distance between

him and the girls. A conclusion with Slocumb reaching the car and being shot down as an equal of the women, or riding together over the cliff, would have been much more logical in regards of the “First Text”, giving a definitive and tragic reality to the idea that “all men are treacherous, violent and narcissistic.”

3. “Alternate Syntagma” or “Parallel Syntagma”?

The “exception” Slocumb represents in regards of the violently misogynistic world of the film is not only inscribed in its syntagmatic structure, but is also profoundly determined by it. The movie’s structure is a rather complex one, relying heavily on different forms of alternating distribution through the use of technological devices such as phones, surveillance video, or alternate series inside the same space. We also have to mention several occurrences of “contrast editing” – for instance when Thelma and Louise pack their bags and dress upon meeting each other at the beginning of the movie –, and at least one rare spatial construct – a highway bathed in the sun where the girls are supposedly driving and Jimmy walking toward his house in the rain, taken in a single one take. One obvious reason for this complexity is that *Thelma & Louise* is a mix between the road-movie and the outlaw-couple film, depicting several characters and locations at the same time. The signified Hal Slocumb is fully integrated and determined by this structure, appearing 16 different times²³:

| |
|---|
| 1. “ Scene ”: //After the shooting, Thelma tries to phone Daryl//Slocumb is interrogating the waitress//Louise tries to call Jimmy// |
| 2. “ Scene ”: //Thelma and Louise have just decided to leave for Oklahoma City//Slocumb with his boss. The boss suggests to call the FBI. Slocumb does not answer//short sound bridge on the girls driving// |
| 3. “ Scene ”: //The two girls decide to go to Mexico//Slocumb is watching data about cars on a computer//the two girls talk about JD, then Thelma confesses she does not want to cross Texas// |
| 4. //“ Scene ”// (redundancy of the music with 3): cutback to Slocumb walking into Louise’s house//cutback to the girls driving// |
| 5. //“ Autonomous Shot ”//: cutback to Slocumb asking for the manager in the restaurant where Louise works//cutback to the girls, who meet JD again// |
| 6. //“ Scene ”//: cutback to Slocumb who is interrogating Daryl//cutback to the girls with JD in the car// |
| 7. //“ Scene ”//: cutback to Slocumb talking with his boss on the phone// cutback to the girls and JD, arriving at Oklahoma city// |

| |
|--|
| 8. “ Ordinary Sequence ”://JD steals the money// Slocumb is not alone anymore, but with a team of policemen. They settle in Thelma’s house and tap the phone//the girls need money and prepare themselves to rob a market// |
| 9. //“ Scene ”//: cutback to the cops through the images of the surveillance video//girls driving fast// |
| 10. “ Ordinary Sequence ”//Louise asks Thelma to phone Daryl//Slocumb brings JD in the police station for interrogation//cutback to the girls stopping at a gas station// |
| 11. //“ Alternate Syntagma ”//: Thelma phones Daryl, then Louise talks to Slocumb//the girls have a fight because Thelma told JD they were heading to Mexico// |
| 12. //“ Autonomous Shot ”//: cutback to the police officers watching TV at Daryl’s house//cutback to the girls driving// |
| 13. “ Scene ”: //The girls lock a policeman inside the trunk of his car//Slocumb and his boss are asking themselves if the girls are lucky or crazy//the girls driving out of the state// |
| 14. “ Alternate Syntagma ”: //Louise calls Slocumb again, asking him if he will believe that it was an accident. Slocumb says yes, but that it does not look like an accident. He then tells Louise that he knows what happened in Texas. The girls’ location is identified// |
| 15. “ Autonomous Shot ”: //Zoom on Daryl’s desperate face//Slocumb and his boss get into a helicopter//girls driving// |
| 16. “ Alternate Syntagma ”: Slocumb joins the girls for the first time in the movie. He prevents the police from shooting them. Louise steps on the accelerator and rides the car over a cliff// |

As a complete outsider – he does not know and is not related personally to any of the girls – Slocumb is a character whose position in the diegesis is *de facto* complex, being at the same time close and remote from Thelma and Louise. This ambiguous feature is all the more evident in the “Scene” which introduces him (segment 1). On the syntagmatic axis, segment 1 could have been located at a different position – for instance just after the shooting, or later when the girls are heading for a hotel room. Instead, it occurs just *between* two phone calls – the first to Daryl, the second to Jimmy²⁴. This is not by chance: phones constitute the preferred vehicle to justify the use of the “Alternate Syntagma” in *Thelma & Louise*. Thus, even if Daryl and Jimmy are absent, and if the phone calls are not supposed in the first place to reach Slocumb, they nonetheless legitimize his sudden introduction. In a sense, they are also significant – though in an indirect manner – of the pressure exerted by the signifier on the signified.

Regarding the difficult problem of the alternation, Christian Metz had at first identified three different types: the “Alternator”, the “Alternate Syntagma”, and the “Parallel Syntagma”²⁵. The “Alternator” corresponds to what he calls the parallel alternation of the signified – for instance, two characters playing tennis together are shown alternatively; in the “Alternate Syntagma”, the alternating of the signifiers corresponds to the *simultaneity* of the signified – for instance, the pursuers and the pursued, like segment 16 in *Thelma & Louise*; finally, the “Parallel Syntagma” is the form where two series of events without any temporal relationship are intermingled: the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not analogous – for example, the rich and the poor, etc. At first sight, it might seem that Scott relies solely on the “Alternate Syntagma” to connect the girls and Slocumb (segments 11, 14 and 16). However, on closer inspection, it appears that segments 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11 and 12 present similarities with either the “Alternate Syntagma” or the “Parallel Syntagma”. Strictly speaking, both series do not actively interact, but the regularity of their occurrences and the redundancy of the music in 3 and 4 strongly suggests a link. The same can be said of segment 9, where the brilliant use of surveillance video brings for the first time ‘together’ the police officer and the girls. As a matter of fact, these ambiguous forms of alternation are perhaps closer to the third type, the “Parallel Syntagma”. As mentioned above, the “Parallel Syntagma” represents events without any temporal relationship. This is not completely the case of *Thelma & Louise*, the order of occurrence of each event being clearly signified – for instance in segment 9, the fact that the robbery has already happened is fully signified. However, compared to the continuous time of *Thelma and Louise*, the temporality in Slocumb narrative is elliptic, being as a matter of fact very close to the one of the “Episodic Sequence”. One example: it is still night in segment 1, but in the previous segment when Thelma phones Daryl, the sky is bright and suggests sunrise. In the same vein, the series from segment 3 to 7 is interspersed with a series whose diegetic time is clearly continuous – it could easily be rendered as an “Ordinary Sequence”. Slocumb is watching data about cars on a computer, then the girls are sitting in the car talking about JD, then the policeman is searching Louise’s house, then the girls are driving (same scenery), then Slocumb enters the restaurant where is working Louise, then the girls meet JD again (same weather, same scenery), then Slocumb asks questions to Daryl about his wife, then the girls are having a nice talk with JD, then Slocumb talks with his boss on the phone, and finally the girls arrive at Oklahoma city. In one single day,

the police officer is thus able to identify the main suspect of a murder, locate and visit her house, then go to the restaurant where she works to obtain fresh information, and finally visit the house of her supposed accomplice... Time in Slocumb’s narrative is obviously compressed and partially independent from the temporality of the one of *Thelma and Louise*: as is the case in the “Parallel Syntagma”, both diegetic time do not correspond. The use of this ambiguous construct makes Slocumb to appear as an omniscient figure, as if his knowledge was not that of a normal policeman but of the God himself. This is all the more obvious in the scene where he walks inside Louise’s house and watches a picture of her as a child: at that moment we hear the – non diegetic – voice of a little girl, as if little Louise was talking directly to the officer from the past, disclosing him her inner secret.

Conclusion

Unlike *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which fosters a real – yet specific – feminist agenda, *Thelma & Louise* is fully inscribed into the patriarchal order. The presence of the “exception” Hal Slocumb reveals the hidden assumption upon which is built the narrative, i.e. that characters like Harlan, Daryl or the truck driver do not exist in the ‘real’ world, that they are mere fantasies. It is against this “Second Text” that the “First Text”, gratuitously violent and gendered, articulates itself. As such, far from being a critic of the alienation of women in our modern societies – and even less of capitalism –, *Thelma & Louise* constitutes in fact a reinforcement of the *status quo*. This is all the more obvious in the specific way the movie negotiates the signification of the “death” of the heroines: what is really reactionary about the last scene of Scott’s movie is not that the girls kill themselves instead of being shot by the police, but that the first image to appear after the freeze frame of them plunging to their deaths is a return at the beginning of their journey, or an image of Thelma wearing big hair, a frilly dress and Louise sporting a tidy hairdo and fancy glasses: in one word, an image of womanhood fully embedded into the patriarchal order. The ambiguous construction of alternation we have outlined above is the direct and visible manifestation, at the level of the syntagmatic chain, of this “exception”. It makes the signified Slocumb appears as possessing an all-encompassing knowledge, as being an omniscient figure. He is both inside and outside of the diegetic world of *Thelma & Louise*. As we have seen, it is in the subsuming of the purely diegetic status of the “Alternate Syntagma” through

the introduction of an “exception” – non diegetic time – that an otherwise common signified transforms itself into a very specific entity: he appears to know in advance what the girls are about to do – that they are about to cross the state border, that they will make a phone call to Daryl, that good luck does not last forever, etc. – and that Louise was raped as a teenager in Texas. Thus, the hidden ‘truth’ of the narrative is inscribed in the ambiguous figure of alternation this very “exception” represents. As was the case with the “montage with effect”, syntagmatic forms are reworked and subsumed through a dialectical process which makes them keep their original status through their new one: in that respect, they represent ruptures in continuities. They constitute irregularities in regularities which a normal, ‘general’ reading cannot render properly. Christian Metz’s original “Grande Syntagmatique”, because of its contradictory and unstable dimensions, thus proves itself a structure particularly sensitive to the overdetermined features of the signifying chain.

Notes

1. METZ Christian, “La grande syntagmatique du film narratif”, *Communications* 8 (1966): 120-124. See also its subsequent revisions in “Un problème de sémiologie du cinéma”, “Tableau des « segments autonomes » du film *Adieu Philippe*, de Jacques Rozier”, and “Etude syntagmatique du film *Adieu Philippe*, de Jacques Rozier”, all originally published in *Image et Son* 201 (January 1967): 68-79, 81-94, 95-98. The last three articles have been republished in a revised version in METZ Christian, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2003 (originally published in two different volumes in 1968 and 1972)). For an English translation see METZ Christian, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).
2. BELLOUR Raymond, trans. Diana Matias, “To Segment/To Analyze (on *Gigi*)”, in *The Analysis of Film*, ed. PENLEY Constance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
3. Respectively, CHATEAU Dominique, *Le cinéma comme langage* (Paris : Editions AISS.IASPA, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1986); COLIN Michel, *La grande syntagmatique revisitée*, Trames : Université de Limoges, 1989 (“The Grande Syntagmatique Revisited,” trans. Claudine TOURNAIRE, in ed. BUCKLAND Warren, *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1995), 45-86); ODIN Roger, *Cinéma et production de sens* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990); BUCKLAND Warren, *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); BATEMAN John A. and SCHMIDT Karl-Heinrich, *Multimodal Film Analysis: How Films Mean* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).
4. The insistence with which Metz addresses devices such as fade to black, dissolve, etc. testifies of the fact that he was utterly aware of their “overdetermined” nature and did not consider them as mere chronological markers or conjunctions. In a sense, his insights concerning the “cut” announce (and can be read along with) the more complex notion of “suture” later developed by Jean-Pierre Oudart

and his followers. See OUDART Jean-Pierre, “La Suture”, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 211 (April 1969): 36-45, “La Suture (2)”, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 212, 50-55. For a more general account see SILVERMAN Kaja, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983: 194-236).

5. COLIN, 1995, op. cit., 50-54.
6. On this problem, see METZ, 1974, op. cit., 133.
7. Ibid., 149-150.
8. The fact that Metz did not rewrite or add any footnotes to the passage quoted above on the occasion of the publication of his *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* in 1968 – as he did for many other parts of his essays – is of course also suggestive of the importance he gave to variations embedded in forms of expression such as the “montage with effect”.
9. “[...]les restrictions « verticales » qui peuvent limiter chaque sélection successive ne sont reliées à aucune classification paradigmatique déterminée ; en dernière analyse, lorsqu’un plan a été choisi à l’état Ei, il y a une *infinité* de plans possibles pour apparaître à l’état Ei+1”, CHATEAU, op. cit., 107. Emphasis ours.
10. « En premier lieu, il faut noter que les travaux de sémiologie du cinéma, dans leur grande majorité, s’inspirent plus ou moins directement des modèles de la linguistique structuraliste ou distributionniste, et non pas générative. Ce n’est évidemment pas un hasard. La sémiologie du cinéma est au nombre des sémiotiques dites ‘artistiques’, c’est-à-dire qui ont à faire d’abord à des ‘oeuvres’ (des discours clos, s’offrant d’emblée comme des *corpus*), et non pas à une productivité infinie qui, dans le même temps, serait manifestement réglée. Il est normal que la sémiologie du cinéma ait parmi ses buts principaux d’analyser les films; or, un film est un produit germiné, au sein duquel on ne trouve pas au premier abord d’enchaînements grammaticaux ni agrammaticaux, mais seulement des combinaisons *attestées*. [First of all, it is necessary to note that the work of film semiotics, in the vast majority of cases, is inspired more or less directly by models of structural or distributional linguistics, and not by generative linguistics. This is not by chance. Film semiotics belong to what is called ‘artistic’ semiotics, that is to say semiotics which work first and foremost on ‘artworks’ (enclosed discourses, presenting themselves from the outset as *corpus*), and not on an infinite productivity which, by the same token, would apparently be resolved. It is natural that semiotics has among its main objectives to analyze films; however, each film is a particular product, in the sense in which one does not find on the first approach grammatical nor ungrammatical sequences, but only *attested* combinations.] » METZ Christian, “Rapport sur l’état actuel de la sémiologie du cinéma dans le monde (début 1974)”, in ed. CHATMAN Seymour, ECO Umberto, and KLINCKENBERG Jean-Marie, *A Semiotic Landscape/Panorama Sémiotique*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1979: 151). Our translation.
11. The aim of this paper is *not* to identify new forms of distribution of the syntagmas, but to assess their always actualized and articulated nature. Our position is indebted to the Althusserian concept of “overdetermination”, which considers that any given particular situation or object is always in the last instance *determined*, not in a haphazard, univocal, or empiricist way, but unequally and through the differentiated complex structure of the Whole (ALTHUSSER Louis, “Structure à dominante : contradiction et surdétermination”, in *Pour Marx* (Editions La Découverte, 2005: 215). As such, any segment, syntagma, shot, etc. is always an actualized and overdetermined one, which makes of the undetermined ideal moment when the selection, organization and structuring of the pro-filmic is about to occur a pure abstraction never to be encountered in our ‘real’ discursive conditions of existence.
12. “In the pages ahead, I will review a few more offbeat options explored on modern American movies: the maladjusted protagonist, degrees of character subjectivity, scrambled time schemes, multiple protagonists, and plots based on converging fates and social networks. Many invite re-viewing, teasing the spectator to discover the hows and whys of their construction. At the same time, these

strategies exploit the redundancy built into the classical norms and often mobilize some underused resources of studio-era moviemaking.” BORDWELL David, *The Way Hollywood Tells It – Story and Style in Modern Movies*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006: 82).

13. ŽIŽEK Slavoj, *The Frigate of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001: 26).
14. Ibid., 28-29.
15. BORDWELL David, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
16. METZ 1974, op. cit., 180.
17. On *Adieu Philippine's* production background, see ZAND Nicole, 'Le Dossier Philippine', *Cahiers du Cinema* 148 (October 1963): 32-39.
18. ALTHUSSER Louis, "From *Capital* to Marx's Philosophy", in ALTHUSSER Louis and BALIBAR Etienne, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2009, originally published in 1965).
19. Ibid., 22-23.
20. Ibid., 23.
21. See "Young Mr. Lincoln-de John Ford", *Cahiers du Cinema* no 223 (August 1970): 29-47.
22. Very few studies address the problem of the heterogeneity Slocumb represents in regards of the masculinist universe of *Thelma & Louise*. For instance, Aspasia Kotsopoulos in her account of the conflictual relationship between the women and the law fails to address the ambiguity the policeman embodies, reducing him to a simple "individual". As we will see through the analysis of the syntagmatic chain of the movie in part 3, Slocumb occupies in fact a very specific position. See KOTSOPOULOS Aspasia, "Gendering Expectations: Genre and Allegory," in *Left History*, 8 (2003), 21-24.
23. The names are defined according to the segment where Slocumb appears. // signals a segmental change, and // // signals that a form of *simultaneity* between the signified of two series is suggested at the level of the signifier, without ever constituting itself into an "Alternate Syntagma". For instance, //Scene// means that a scene showing Slocumb is interwoven with scenes of the two girls which bear similarities (whether temporal, rhythmical, etc.).
24. Significantly enough, the first occurrence of Slocumb in the original shooting script is situated before Thelma's phone call to Daryl. See <http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/thelmaandlouise.html> (last access: February 2018).
25. METZ Christian, "Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema", in METZ 1974, op. cit., 102-103.

(Assistant Professor, Institute of Urban Innovation)

「例外」の概念を通して クリスチャン・メッツの「大連辞」を再読する ——『テルマ&ルイーズ』を事例に

ファビアン・カルパントラ

近年における映画研究は、矛盾や不規則よりも秩序と規則に注目していると言える。認知主義映画学や生成文法の影響下に再構成を余儀なくされてきた映画記号学は、そのようなアプローチの典型であろう。ところが、そうした捉え方は些細な変化や一般的なカテゴリーに当てはまらない「例外」に十分に注意を払ってきたとは言えない。本論の目的は、テキストとしての映画内の「例外」や映画様式の変遷における「例外」を、クリスチャン・メッツ（1931-1993）が60年代に提示した「大連辞」という理論的構築を独自の解釈により、捉え直すところにある。そのため、スラヴォイ・ジジェクによって映画研究に導入された「例外」の概念とルイ・アルチュセールの「兆候的読解」による「第一のテキスト」と「第二のテキスト」というカテゴリーを援用しながら、1991年に公開され賛否両論を呼んだ『テルマ&ルイーズ』というハリウッドの“フェミニスト映画”における「交替性（Alternation）」と「平行性（Parallelism）」の特異性を分析する。