Introduction

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The Structures of the Film Experience: Filmic Identification

Today, insisting on the importance of the cinematic fact has become a banality. Certainly, if we had to list the various technologies that have, to varying degrees, transformed our contemporary lives, the cinema would occupy a privileged place. The breadth of cinematic production and the large audiences it attracts among the mass public make cinema a veritable ‘institution' of our era.

Film, as has been amply stated, exerts a considerable hold over both the individual and the crowd. The literature on this matter is abundant, yielding various results with an uneven success rate, which usually stigmatize rather than analyze this phenomenon. For the most part, this discussion has focused on the phenomena of ‘fascination,' the ‘outsized control of the image,' spectatorial enchantment, and even the ‘magic of the movies.'

Theoretical analysis, whose role has been to provide an explanation for these phenomena, has for its part had recourse to the Freudian mechanism of identification. This is a convenient concept, which furnishes a descriptive, explicative principle that is particularly well adapted to the filmic situation. It has inspired numerous analyses and endowed scholarship with a precious guiding thread. We only have to flick through specialized academic journals to notice the already considerable volume of studies dedicated to deepening our understanding of the nature of filmic identification – which, depending on the subjacent theoretical conceptions or the nuanced considerations of the process, also goes by the names of ‘emotional participation,' ‘projection' or ‘empathy’ – as well as its repercussions for individuals and the masses.

And yet, this book proposes to once more take the process of filmic identification for its object, despite the fact that it has been studied so often. What are the reasons motivating this new approach? First, it seems essential to us to constantly rework and perfect the general principles of a discipline, in this case filmology, whose most legitimate aspiration is to become a genuine science.

But to this theoretical reason we can add another, more profound reason, whose delineation may permit us to recognize the perspective in which the present study is situated.
In their rush to apply the process of identification to the filmic situation, the majority of studies dedicated to the problem have, it seems, abusively simplified the data. Often, the original form of the Freudian mechanism has been ‘transplanted’ into the filmic situation without any changes. But this neglects the fact that the mechanism in question, in the framework of developments in psychoanalysis and other theoretical tendencies, had itself undergone various retouches, and nourished numerous controversies, and that it was thus rather hasty to utilize the notion of identification without subjecting it to a prior critical examination. In order to bear fruit, the notion must be envisaged in the framework of more recent currents of thought that have developed either as an extension of psychoanalysis, or in disagreement with it.

Furthermore, it also seems that filmological research has sinned through an excess of positivism. It was too quick to adopt the approach of a certain scientific attitude, an approach that consisted of objectivizing, or, better, externalizing, in the domain of objective realities observable from the outside, phenomena whose reality is to be found internally, in the experience of the subject.

Thus, filmic identification came to be considered in its objective form, that is, as a psychic mechanism (a mechanism of projection and introjection) or as a function (an empathic function) destined to comprehend or explain the functioning of the objective models of the personality constructed by scientific theory.

It is easy to see the reasons for this position to be adopted. Aside from the fact that it could be expressed in terms that were seductive by dint of their scientific allure, it seemingly justified submitting these phenomena to observation and quantification. It is, after all, generally admitted that the psyche can be regarded as an object, a slice of the perceptual world, or even an externally observable apparatus, if not in and of itself (the psyche has never been observable as an object), then at least by means of its manifestations, or through the objective representations that we construct of it.

But, in adopting this point of view, which it often did, filmology exposed itself to the same reproach that, in the last few years, phenomenological thinking has addressed to the scientific attitude in general, and which has done much to weaken it.

By transposing psychic phenomena to an external objectivized form, that is, by reducing them to the state of simple functions or mechanisms, their very nature was altered, and their meaning or signification was thereby lost. This meaning or signification can only be perceived if we place ourselves
on the terrain from which these phenomena have been extracted – namely, lived, first-person experience.

It is therefore appropriate to study what the scientific attitude generally starts out by ignoring: the experience of the subject. We must explore, describe, and explain phenomena such as they are immediately lived, and not such as they are conceived by virtue of some pre-established objective schema. In other words, we must make the effort to discover the meaning of phenomena as they present themselves to the subject who experiences them.

It is also appropriate, however, to clarify what we mean by ‘description of lived experience.’ It is not a matter, of course, of elucidating particular forms of behavior – for example, a given identification of a given subject with a given person – through the concrete modalities of their realization, but, rather, of unveiling the invariable aspect in these particular forms of behavior. In other words, we must abstract real forms of behavior and the structures that we can locate in all forms of the same kind of behavior, which themselves are their specific, concrete realizations.

Could it be said that, by effectuating this kind of abstraction, we slip back into the impasses of the scientific attitude?

In effect, elucidating the invariable structure of a psychic phenomenon supposes that we consider this phenomenon, that we take a distance with respect to it, and that we have an experience of the experience in a consciousness of consciousness, which, we might justly say, constitutes a certain form of objectivation.

But at least by operating this kind of objectivation, we do not escape the experience of the subject – that is, the reality of the phenomena studied. The scientific attitude, in contrast, proceeds from a double objectivation. It also starts out from the formal structure of experience and, in doing so, it must accomplish an initial objectivation similar to what we have just spoken about. But it does not remain on that level. Instead, it accomplishes a second objectivation by placing in the external world what it has internally abstracted, by situating it in an objective, externally observable model, and thus, as we said above, by losing its meaning for the subject and real nature. This is why, we may say in passing, scientists always speak of intuition, because for them, the data of primary abstraction – bearing on their experience as a subject – are only ever presumptions or hypotheses that can serve to comprehend the objective model of psychism which they have constructed, and which, while it is supposed to represent it (they are themselves psychisms), are nonetheless exterior to it, and indeed rather alien to it.

As for the right to treat phenomena scientifically, to submit them to evaluation and quantification, we think that it will not be contested if,
rather than beginning with objective representations of phenomena, we start with the description that an internal reading can deliver. Simply put, instead of drawing its hypothetical intuitions from objective models, which sometimes do violence to the most evident data of experience, such a description would formulate them on the basis of this very experience, explained in descriptive terms.

Thus, the basis for research must not be any kind of conception of man as an object of observation, but an explanation of man as a subject of experience.

The problem touched on here is evidently vaster and more complex than what we have just allowed it to seem. Unfortunately, the developments that it calls for cannot fit into the framework of this short introduction. Here, we can only affirm our conviction that, in matters of human science, reflection on the experience of phenomena is primordial, and normally precedes that which it must inspire and towards which it must orient itself – to wit, a scientific approach to these phenomena.

Thus, it seems to us that the point of departure for filmological reflection, as is the case for all reflection on human phenomena, consists of the description and explanation of this new and undoubtedly original experience that is the film experience.

The present study constitutes an attempt in this direction.

For us, it will not be a question of objectively representing to ourselves the experience of the spectator-subject, but, of placing ourselves within this experience, of attempting to describe and reveal its meaning, and specify its fundamental structures.

Here, sketched rapidly, are the major stages of this research. First, we will locate, using the texts of important filmmakers, what the notions of perception and identification relate to, notions which are evidently fundamental for the study of the problems occupying us. Let us note that, apart from a few rare personal considerations, this first part will not convey anything particularly novel. Indeed, it may even be seen as a rather pointless reminder of notions that are already familiar in philosophy and psychology. However, if we consider the particular status of filmology, we may understand the reasons for this long overview.

In fact, in the current state of things, filmology is not an autonomous science, but more a site of reflection situated at the intersection of the major human sciences. It can be of interest to the philosopher, the psychologist, the pedagogue, the sociologist, and even the philologist and the linguist.
This is why any reflection on its object necessitates that those who embark on this reflection must clarify their perspective and recall the notions of the disciplines from which they draw.

The first part of our work has been conceived as a response to this demand. Its essential goal is to present certain specifically psychological notions and problems to the reader unversed in the field. Let us note that, upon rereading our work, some of the chapters in this first part strike us as not a little superfluous (this is the case, notably, for Chapters V, VI, and VII), with respect to the whole. We have nonetheless retained them, with the thought that they could help some of our readers to be more familiar with the language and, above all, the problems specific to psychology. Those for whom psychology is a foreign domain will perhaps find the means to better recognize the perspective in which this work is globally situated.

The second part consists of the more original component of this study. We will try, with this modest contribution, to sketch out a description of the essential structures of the film experience, conceived as a specific mode of relating to the world and to other people. We will also try to define and explain the fundamental attitudes that this experience solicits on the part of the subject-spectator. Subsequently, in the same descriptive spirit, we will try to clarify the modalities of comportment (identification) that support the various attitudes described.

Finally, in the third part, we will endeavor to open certain perspectives in the study of the extensions of the film experience in the existence and the comportment of the spectator.

As is customary, it is appropriate to conclude this brief introduction by formulating the usual reservations that stand in for any possible rectifications and underscore the incomplete character of the proposed study.

But we would like to do so in more convincing terms than those generally deployed. In our case, these reservations are dictated much more by reality than by a conventional sentiment of modesty.

Thus, to preserve the valuable, or ever so slightly original, aspect of this research, we feel the necessity to highlight its relative, incomplete character. This limit is tied to two things: on the one hand, there is our own lack of experience in the subject, and on the other hand, there is filmology’s own relative lack of experience. Filmology is, indeed, a new discipline, and every reflection concerning it is exercised on a terrain that has still received too little recognition to not be uncertain and effectively partial.

We should not, therefore, expect definitive conclusions from this study. Inevitably, the views expressed here will be criticized, corrected, and even refuted with scientific progress in the field. Unavoidably, too, some (possibly
important aspects of the problems occupying us will escape us or will not be given the space they deserve.

But what we do hope will come out of this work is that, beyond its imperfections, it shows some contours of the truth, some new insights, some interesting perspectives, and that, above all, it provides a source of inspiration for new hypotheses conducive to advancing the cause of filmology.