Stages of an Encounter with Filmic Identification

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Abstract

Meunier wrote his major work in 1969 as phenomenology slipped under the sway of structuralism. His next book followed Edgar Morin from a phenomenology of identification with images to an anthropology of mass culture. But in 1969, Meunier ignored Morin and other contemporary theorists. He relied instead on Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and the filmologists. His three-stage approach to experience derives from Husserl and echoes Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. This kept him at a remove from French film studies, though he gained some notice in the USA, especially after the return of phenomenology in the late 1980s. This English translation lets us rethink issues that film theory has engaged with for a century, and that came to a head in 1969.

Keywords: Filmology; phenomenology; structuralism; Edgar Morin; Paul Ricoeur; Jean-Pierre Meunier

I ran into Jean-Pierre Meunier through his book The Structures of the Film Experience in the autumn of 1973. It was at La Minotaure, the mythical bookstore at 2 rue des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where I loved to go as it was just across from where André Bazin and Chris Marker had worked for years after the war in the offices of Travail et Culture, a communist outreach organization where cinema played a leading role among all the arts. Like all genuine encounters, I engaged The Structures of the Film Experience in three stages. The first stage found me instantly disposed to the book, wanting to understand its possibilities. It was very different from the semiotic studies that were then so fashionable. I was in Christian Metz’s seminar that year along with ten others. Among these was Geneviève Sellier who, when I mentioned this book, told me, “Ah phenomenology: Merleau-Ponty. This is

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what my parents used to read." Evidently, I had picked up Meunier when his way of thinking was on the outs.

A few years later, stage two set in, when I pulled away for a more analytical view, carefully examining the book’s elements and composition. In completing *The Major Film Theories*, I determined to add a final section on the remnants of phenomenology in which Meunier is mentioned.¹ No one who reviewed that book cared to talk about this chapter; so, in 1977, I wrote an article entitled “The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Theory,”² in which I located Meunier’s approach, lamenting that it had been ignored, a casualty of the era of ‘Grand Theory.’ Even if the word ‘structures’ appeared in his title, Meunier was obviously closer to Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology than to Lévi-Strauss and structuralism. My encounter now enters stage three with the appearance of this English translation. Re-approaching the book, I now aim, in Paul Ricoeur’s schema, to ‘comprehend’ it, that is, to apply it as a map to clarify, and perhaps to re-view and re-traverse, the overgrown field of film theory.

**Tripartite Structures in Phenomenology**

Phenomenology and hermeneutics operate via stages like this, generally in threes. Merleau-Ponty overcame impasses in Sartre’s thought by adding a third term to Sartre’s binary categories. Where Sartre cleaved experience into being and nothingness, presence and absence, language system and personal style, Merleau-Ponty interjected an intermediary term. For instance, perception involves three stages that ramp up virtually together thanks to our body’s rapport with nature: sensation, then recognition, and finally interpretation.³ First come light and shadow, colors and movement, forms and blurs; then bodies, objects, backgrounds, and a scene come into view; finally, in stage three, interpretation resolves a perception by inserting it in a larger sphere of orientation or action.

Each perception, retained at the ready, sets the stage for a subsequent triad. Retention of the immediate past is part of the current moment of perception, which involves protention of what likely comes next; hence, each instance (or instant) of perception chains the past to the future.⁴ Thanks to protention, the imagination enters perception. Sartre notoriously divided mental states into either imagination or perception; in the latter, consciousness is absorbed in what is present, whereas imagination consists of immaterial states of remembering, wishing, dreaming, or the like. Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl more closely than did Sartre, assumes that past
perceptions, colored by their affect – including the experiences they were part of and the reflexes they triggered – constitute predispositions for new, current perceptions, which project themselves toward future perceptions. Retention and protention make room for temporal slippage in the same way that, in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la perception*), slippage between background and foreground makes space both continuous and dynamic.

Inheriting phenomenology’s description of (three-stage) processes, rather than binary states of being, Paul Ricoeur fought the structuralism of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. The title of his brilliant 1964 riposte, “Structure-Word-Event,” inserts a term between system and contingency. In Saussure, the a-historical permanence of language’s rules grounds an indefinite number of everyday speech events; whereas, in Ricoeur, speech events occur within history. A third term is required for the vital dimension of meaning in history. This third term, ‘Word,’ does not have the logical necessity of grammatical ‘Structure’ but is more permanent than any ‘Event’ of speech. Its etymology points to the historical birth of each word, while examples (including their dates, in the OED) attest to the accretion of its meanings over time. Words have histories and provoke habits of speech, since prior speech events are drawn upon by every speaker who projects language for a purpose into a future. This schema lines up with Merleau-Ponty’s view of history: the sedimentation of successive interpretations of events upon which new events play themselves out. Words, institutions, and ideologies exist as accretions of sedimnted meanings.

When Meunier wrote this book on filmic identification, he thought to break it down in the mode of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur, whom he does not mention but who, more than the others, conceived of experience in explicit stages. Meunier planned to approach identification as a three-step process: description, analysis, speculation. But the richest sources he draws on in his account of filmic perception turn out to be taken less from phenomenology than from the filmology of the 1940s and early 1950s. The last sentence of his book prays that he has “contributed to creating unity within the science of filmology” (p. 154). The lure of scientific objectivity led him to structural descriptions seemingly at odds with ‘process-oriented’ phenomenology.

*The Structures of the Film Experience* could appear to be a prelude to the topic Metz would soon take up on the psychoanalysis of identification. As Martin Lefèbvre has thoroughly documented, Metz’s starting point is also filmology. His first essays, written prior to, though not cited in, Meunier’s book, including the important “On the Impression of Reality in Cinema” (“Sur l’impression de réalité au cinéma”), revolve within the orbit of filmology.
Though this postwar institute had been forced to leave Paris for Milan in 1959, something of its scent emanates from the journal *Communications*, volume one of which dates from 1960. Filmology was sedimented at the École pratique des hautes études in the 1960s under the administrative umbrella of Edgar Morin (a founder of *Communications*), whose two most illustrious figures were Algirdas Greimas (Metz’s director of studies) and Roland Barthes, author of *The Fashion System* (*Systèmes de la mode*), “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” (“Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits”), and *Elements of Semiology* (*Éléments de sémiologie*).

By 1969, structuralism had indisputably prevailed in the battle for intellectual hegemony in the Francophone world (indeed post-structuralism was well underway). In Anglophone film studies things were more in flux. When Meunier’s book first met the world, I was at the University of Iowa arguing structuralism in my seminars on literary theory with Gayatri Spivak, Angelo Bertocci, and Robert Scholes. Disciplined film studies matured in the US at this time in a handful of institutions: Iowa, Northwestern, Wisconsin, NYU, UCLA. Peter Wollen’s *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* arrived in 1969, affecting the way we discussed auteurs, and initiating debates about the status of the image as ‘sign.’ In Paris, 1969 was when Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni delivered their manifesto classifying films according to ideological valence. This overriding political-ideological dimension was understood by *Cahiers du cinéma*, which I followed, to operate via forms of filmic identification that exerted inescapable force via distinct processes like those of suture. Jean-Pierre Oudart’s essays on this most treasured concept appeared in this crucial year.

Structuralists approach texts from systems external to them (linguistic, anthropological, psychoanalytic, ideological), whereas phenomenology, ever since Husserl, starts its inquiries from the natural attitude by describing interior processes. Meunier’s starting point is mixed; he appears to work like a social scientist aiming to clarify and map the inner life of cinema, the transactions of a text with the spectator’s capacities to see and to imagine. Predecessors such as Henri Wallon, and Albert Michotte van den Berck, whom Meunier cites (pp. 101-102 and 71-76), and especially Edgar Morin (whom he does not cite) shared this double heritage.

**Meunier, Morin, and the Filmology Movement**

Evidently, Meunier soon recognized that his ideas were part of an ongoing debate, for, right at the outset of his second book, *Esai sur l’image et la*
communication, he does cite Morin’s *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man* (*Cinéma ou L’homme imaginaire*, 1956), alongside Metz’s essays on the impression of reality and on the phenomenology of narrative. He also recapitulates Mitry’s objections to Cohen-Séat’s filmological notion of identification. These references support the book’s first longer section, which he tells us was written as his 1972 habilitation and closely resembles *The Structures of the Film Experience*. The shorter part two, devoted to the image in mass communication, brings up Morin’s later writings alongside references to Baudrillard, Deleuze, Foucault, Clastres, and Debord, all of whom forecast a new image society.11

Meunier’s mix of interests, evident in the second book, closely resembles Morin’s. Both men move from the phenomenology of imagination to the social anthropology of images. The early Morin was specifically interested in the state of ‘fascination’ that a spectator enters when dealing with the magic of ‘the double’ on the screen. Often deploying the language of phenomenology, *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man* is an anthropological study of humans haunted by their shadows. In the protected space of the movie theater, associational dream logic is unleashed by what Morin calls the spectator’s “projection-identification loop,” in which shadows thrown on a screen return to the spectator through his identification with their quasi-objectivity. Morin’s more openly sociological study, *The Stars* (*Les Stars*, 1957), examines not the fictional worlds of films so much as the post-fictional behavior of fans who imitate stars.

Meunier takes up both these directions of inquiry, concluding the first part of his second book with a chapter titled “Participation et Identification” that explicitly addresses the notion of fascination, and then embarking on part two, “Communications et Société.” Even in *The Structures of the Filmic Experience*, this dual approach is present in the idea of imitative behavior, though Morin’s name is absent. Both men are rooted in filmology. Morin published in their flagship journal, *Revue internationale de filmologie*, and, like Meunier, he cites Michotte van den Berck. He would adopt much of filmology’s mission in *Communication*, a journal that would become an abundant source for cine-structuralism in the UK and the US, where journals like *Screen*, *Diacritics*, and *New Literary History* echoed its topics and approaches. Barthes, Greimas, Todorov, Bremond, and Metz became well-known to us film scholars; whereas the couple of Italian semioticians who had any impact (Emilio Garroni, Giancarlo Bettetini) were associated neither with filmology nor with its Italian journal *IKON*; instead, they were linguists. Pasolini was a case apart; an important one for American film studies after his essay “Cinema of Poetry,” (“Cinema di poesia”) delivered
in Pesaro in 1965, passed through Cahiers du cinéma and became available to the rest of the world. Meunier does not cite the Communications group (Metz, Barthes) until his 1980 publication; perhaps he felt closer to early filmology because some of the most significant figures were Belgian (such as Albert Michotte van den Berck and Alphonse de Waelhens), and their ideas were alive in the Université Catholique de Louvain, where Meunier studied, taught, and published his books.

Throughout the 1950s in Paris, filmology appealed to philosophers, sociologists, and perceptual psychologists so as to be recognized as a legitimate university discourse. However, it never welcomed film historians, critics, or ‘film theorists,’ as they were already being called. And neither does Meunier, who turns his back on the French cinephilic discourse, never looking to Epstein, Bazin, or even Mitry. It is especially surprising that his book excludes Mitry (he rectifies this in the 1980 book), since Mitry, the co-founder of the Cinémathèque française and author of a five-volume history of cinema, was far more than a cinephile. He had been appointed a university professor and his formidable Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema (Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma) appeared in two large volumes from the Presses Universitaires de France (1963-1965). With minute analyses of such traits as cinematic rhythm, subjective camera, and reflexive montage, and with copious references to philosophies of perception and cognition, Mitry produced an informal encyclopedia of film theory. His eight pages on the question of identification directly respond to the work of certain filmologists. His is an effort to account for the film experience in a systematic, phenomenological manner. What does Meunier think of his insistence on the ‘solidity of absence’ established by the real movement of the shadows on the screen, against the immobility of the spectator enframed before it? Even Christian Metz, often considered a harsh opponent of phenomenology, embarked on his career with essays responding directly to Mitry’s views of narrative and identification. Meunier does not acknowledge this tradition until 1980. The Structures of the Film Experience even ignores Albert Laffay’s Logique du cinéma (The Logic of Cinema), a 1964 treatise that built on that author’s impressive postwar essays published in a Sartrean vein in Les Temps modernes and La Revue du cinéma. Metz saluted Laffay in a 1965 review, published in the same issue of Communications, wherein he famously locked horns with volume one of The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema. Metz pinpoints the concept of ‘quasi-reality’ as Laffay’s most signal contribution, though he shows it to be insufficiently developed. But any rendezvous one ought to have predicted between these French theorists and Meunier...
was missed, the fault lying on both sides. For Metz never said what he thought of Meunier’s ideas about cinematic ontology and spectatorial identification, or about the experience of the image and of fiction – issues both men shared with Laffay at exactly the same moment, as they slipped from phenomenology toward structuralism. Later on, Meunier would acknowledge this moment. 14

Echoes of Sartre

Given its title, Meunier’s book could have served as jumping-off place for Metz’s famous chapter on identification in the 1975 work The Imaginary Signifier (Le Signifiant imaginaire). 15 Perhaps he wanted to avoid association with Merleau-Ponty through Meunier’s reliance on this philosopher. Oddly, shortly after Metz wrote his psychoanalytic book, his friend Roland Barthes published Camera Lucida (La Chambre claire), which he dedicated to Sartre’s The Imaginary (L’Imaginaire), the very book that is the explicit source for Meunier’s reflections. You can feel how important The Imaginary is for Meunier when he accounts for the peculiar fascination and momentum belonging to the three distinct types of film he identifies: home movies, documentaries, and narrative fictions. Identification is the key with which he unlocks the inner dynamics of one mode after the next, by meditating on the viewer’s shifting states of consciousness in digesting various types and organizations of images.

Bazin also drew heavily on The Imaginary. As I have previously detailed, a copy of the 1940 first edition of Sartre’s book was on the shelf above Bazin’s deathbed. 16 When Janine Bazin let me select a book as a souvenir, this is the one I chose. It sat throughout 1973 and 1974 right next to my heavily marked-up copy of Meunier’s volume. But I did not open Bazin’s copy of Sartre for three decades. If I had done so right away, I would have seen that Bazin had underlined some of the same passages that appealed to Meunier. Furthermore, Bazin typed out a page of responses to Sartre that he left folded in the book, and which have guided my understanding of his difference from Sartre. He distinguishes three types of images (three again): photographic, filmic, televisual – all of them seen in relation to ‘presence,’ and thus to our way of absorbing them.

Leaning almost exclusively on early Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and supplemented by filmological articles dating to 1953, Meunier, as we have seen, skips over film theory and criticism. Taking his cue from Husserl (or even Descartes), he effectively starts from scratch on a difficult problem: how
Do spectators relate to films and the characters within them? Although he does not cite him, Meunier’s position sometimes comes close to what Bazin (and Deleuze) would propose when, for example, he posits fiction films as quasi-real:

We can now see more precisely what belief is. It implies that we depart from the category of the real, in order to be fascinated by an unreal world, a world that we posit neither as existent nor non-existent, that we never cease to regard as imaginary, but to which we consent, or rather, which we let ourselves believe in. Belief, in the cinema, is rather comparable to belief when playing (p. 95).

Meunier’s table of contents, as if modeled on that of a philosophical treatise, is leaner and more abstract than the one Morin constructed for *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man* and Mitry for his two volumes. Those more verbose theorists try to corral their overbrimming thoughts and examples by organizing them post-facto. Meunier, however, began with a clean outline. In part one, he treats the general experience of perception and identification; then, in part two he narrows the target to the experience of filmic identification. Each of these parts is given in two large chapters with numerous subsections. Throughout, the symmetries and oppositions are easy to keep track of; indeed, they provide much of the book’s pleasure, while making it easy to see where the argument is headed.

This table of contents echoes that of Sartre’s *The Imaginary*, the explicit source for Meunier’s chief premise: every filmic consciousness is a relation to a world, but a world that is posited as not there. This constitutive absence that operates in all films differs according to mode, of which there are three: home movies (*le film-souvenir*), documentaries, and fictions. Thanks to this absence, all films require an investment by the spectator, although the type and quality of that investment varies. Phenomenological description distinguishes each from the others.

Laffay and others may have addressed our investment in fiction films before Meunier, but the types of investment required by home movies and documentaries is original to this book. Meunier would not accept for home movies what Mitry wrote about fictional works: “the film image purports to be the same as the mental image [...] fixed inside our memories [...] with the one difference that memory in this case is a strip of celluloid.” When Mitry then goes on to detach the image from the viewer since it is the product of someone else’s memory bank, he ignores the case of home movies that individuals record and return to. The use of cinema to recall something of
one's own familiar world (often one's family world) would not be studied comprehensively until the semiologist Roger Odin in the 1980s. As for documentary, Mitry has little to say. Although this mode had long been on the agenda in film studies, its distinct phenomenology had best been seized by Bazin in his reviews of films of exploration. Meunier's plan to examine the viewer's manner of processing documentary film was therefore novel; it would have been more revolutionary but for the paucity of his pool of examples. His documentary category comprises only films with a pedagogical function, ignoring essay films and experiential explorations. While most documentaries in the 1960s were indeed produced by institutions rather than personally authored (as fiction films often are) or made as diaries (in the manner of home movies), many subcategories of documentary would seem to demand a different interior description. Meunier does use the example of *Lonely Boy* (Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor, 1963), a rather ambiguous portrait of pop singer Paul Anka, but overall he considers documentaries to be films made to instruct the spectator in the workings of a world beyond the spectator's knowledge. This is how the documentary film differs from the home movie, which presents the spectator with a world he already knows.

In restricting documentary primarily to a mode of instruction, Meunier misses the entire function of what I call “cinema of discovery.” This tradition began with Flaherty, whose *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922) Meunier does in fact cite. In my view, Flaherty spent years with his subjects so as to discover what the untrained eye, or even the human eye in general, could not see. The camera does better than the eye. And the film does more than instruct; it discovers and delivers an abundance of audiovisual information otherwise unavailable, challenging the viewer to adopt a different temporality. Such ‘artistic documentaries’ can be unpredictable, unlike most fiction films and unlike most pedagogical documentaries. Even the length of artistic documentaries is uncertain, whereas fiction films and commissioned documentaries come in at standard lengths. The shape of a film, like Chris Marker's *Koumiko Mystery* (*Le mystère Koumiko*, 1967) or Johan van der Keuken's *Blind Child* (1965), is impossible to predict, and this surely affects the spectator’s attention, perception, and identification. Recent bold experiments in documentary – from Harun Farocki’s work to that of Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab – comprise a rich repertoire and could include hybrid cases of fiction-documentary like *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), which challenge Meunier’s clean categories; but Meunier’s methodology, especially had he applied it to complex documentaries available in 1969, could clarify the spectator’s experience of such cases. With
experimentation in mind, what about experimental or avant-garde cinema, a distinct mode Meunier does not address at all? Often without characters, such films explore not the world so much as perception, including cinematic perception. Do Stan Brakhage's films, like *Dog Star Man* (1964) or *Scenes from Under Childhood* (1967), invite identification with the filmmaker's eye, with the camera, or with some putative subjective center as in the romantic tradition of poetry?

At the conclusion of *Concepts in Film Theory* (1984), using the same notion of stages that Meunier draws, I suggest that the modes of film are tied to the level at which they “do their principle work.” Experimental film operates at the level of sensation as it congeals into perception; documentary operates more at the level of perceived or recognized objects as these begin to constitute a complex world; and fiction films, which seldom challenge viewers at the level of perception or recognition, instead operate at the level of the values of the world once it has been recognized and put in dramatic motion. My aim was to take Meunier’s structures and turn them into processes. One must work toward perception, in other words, and then, literally come to terms with what is perceived as a recognized situation, before one can proceed with higher-order processes of interpretation.

My ideas were informed at the time by a new stage in the phenomenology of the film experience that came into its own around 1980 in France. Mitry at this time was aggressively attacking semiotics in an effort to keep alive his 1960s aesthetics based on perception and style. He felt he had established what might be called the terms of perceptual constraint operating in all theories (thus, both in Meunier’s typology of identification and in Metz’s structural psychoanalysis). Mitry had declared:

> One thing is certain: the brilliance of the screen against almost totally black surroundings produces a sort of preoccupying fascination which confines the impressions of consciousness within a frame which is clearly circumscribed. During the projection of a film, nothing is (or can be) perceived except what is presented on the screen […] we only appreciate the image content relative to what it presents to our eyes, though we never lose self-consciousness.

In 1980, perhaps as a revolt against such constraints, yet still in a quite phenomenological tone, Roland Barthes insisted on decentering the viewing situation in the presence of the *punctum*. Whereas the *studium* controls the spectator’s relation to the image, the punctum returns the image to the spectator’s wayward and private memories, attachments, and instincts.
Notably, Barthes felt this delicious possibility to belong to still images only. He needed to stop the film, so he could control the temporality of the experience of viewing, something he did in “The Third Meaning” as well, and something that Laura Mulvey does in Death 24x a Second, too.24

But on the heels of Barthes came an even more radically phenomenological approach, one that does not arrest the film, but relishes its ceaseless movement as liberating an uncontrollable gush of images, some of which are interior and personal, others cultural, and all of which take place in a temporal vacuum, without duration. Jean Louis Schefer’s The Ordinary Man of Cinema (L’Homme ordinaire du cinéma), a nearly impossible book to assimilate into the system of cinema studies when it appeared, changed the stakes of film phenomenology. I pointed to it in 1984 in Concepts in Film Theory; about the same time, Wide Angle published a section of it in English alongside an excellent introduction situating its importance by Paul Smith.25 Championed by many theorists on both sides of the Atlantic (Deleuze, Raymond Bellour, Jacques Aumont, Tom Conley), it was only in 2016 that it was translated in full.26 However, uncomfortably suited to the digital age that perhaps it anticipated too well, this book may have missed its moment. Whereas when it was published in 1980 (just when Meunier’s second book appeared), it had the force of a completely new perspective, a description of the filmic experience but without any structures holding it in place.

The 1980s, it should be recalled, found Betamax and VHS machines promising a new manner of watching film. No longer Mitry’s “brilliant screen surrounded by black”; no longer Bellour’s ineluctable, implacable unrolling of images beyond the viewer’s control.27 Suddenly the spectator has come to be in control, to change speeds, change films, become a DJ of his own experience. We can now own films (purchase them like books) and own our own spectatorship. Cinema studies has yet to fully accommodate itself to this shift, though Vivian Sobchack’s 1992 Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience and especially her 1999 article “Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience” go a long way toward that goal, using Meunier’s book more thoroughly and valuably than anyone before or since.28 And Schefer’s ordinary man is now everyman at the cinema, awash in a sea of screens where identification operates so differently it must surely mean something quite distinct from what it did in 1980, let alone in 1969.

It may be claimed that Jean-Pierre Meunier’s book applies to a situation that no longer governs our relation to moving pictures; even if this is so, however, he has provided a model by which to clarify our situation, and he supplies the basic modes of experience from which our relation to newer forms of moving images derive. For, despite the mutations and explosion of
spectating situations, film spectators still behave much in the manner he so clearly laid out. We still return to our personal worlds; we still come to terms with a world beyond ourselves that we believe is out there and must learn to meet; and we still involve ourselves in fictions, which belong neither to us, nor to the actual world but in the midst of which, through identification, we play out other possibilities in other circumstances.

Notes


12. The most up-to-date history of the “filmologie movement” can be found in the double issue of *Cinémas: revue d'études cinematographiques* 19:2-3 (2009), edited by Francois Albera and Martin Lefebvre.


18. Roger Odin’s works on home movies are collected in *Le Film de famille* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1999).


22. Mitry, *Aesthetics and Psychology*, p. 82.


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