Between Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis: Jean-Pierre Meunier's Theory of Identification in the Cinema

Daniel Fairfax

Abstract
This paper aims to situate Meunier's *The Structures of the Film Experience* within the constellation of film theory at the time of its writing in 1969. More specifically, it argues that Meunier's text can, in retrospect, be seen as a 'missing link' in film theory, bridging the divide between phenomenological and psychoanalytic approaches to the study of cinema, which can be more profitably seen as complementing each other rather than existing in a state of mutual enmity. However, whereas apparatus theorists, such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, drew primarily on Lacan for the contribution of psychoanalysis to an understanding of filmic identification, Meunier is distinct in turning instead to the Freudian Angelo Hesnard for his take on the phenomenon.

Keywords: Angelo Hesnard; apparatus theory; Jean-Louis Baudry; Christian Metz; home movie

For historians of film theory, one of the most intriguing aspects of Jean-Pierre Meunier’s *The Structures of the Film Experience* is the year of its publication: 1969. The last year of the 1960s was one of the banner years in the history of film theory, on a par with 1925 (the year of Eisenstein’s *Strike* and his first texts on montage), and 1945 (Bazin’s “Ontology of the Photographic Image” and the dawn of the neorealist movement in Italy). Above all, 1969 has gone down as the birth-moment of the ‘Marxo-Freudian’ strand of film theory. This moment saw an abrupt shift in editorial policies on flagship film journals on both sides of the English channel – *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Screen* – as well as the founding of the explicitly radical journal *Cinéthique*. 

Hanich, J. and D. Fairfax (eds.), *The Structures of the Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier. Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions*, Amsterdam University Press, 2019
DOI 10.5117/9789462986565_fairfax
In France, landmark articles such as Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni’s “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” (“Cinéma/ideologie/critique”) and Jean-Pierre Oudart’s “Cinema and Suture” (“La Suture”) appeared in 1969, and were quickly followed by Jean-Louis Baudry’s “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus” (“Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base”) in 1970, while in the UK the first edition of Peter Wollen’s Signs and Meaning in the Cinema was published, and Screen’s turn to political modernism ensued shortly afterwards. Debates swirled around contemporary politicized films such as Jean-Luc Godard/Jean-Pierre Gorin’s Wind from the East (Vent d’est, 1969), Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet’s Othon (1969), Costa-Gavras’s Z (1969), and Fernando Solanas/Octavio Getino’s Hour of the Furnaces (La Hora de los hornos, 1968).

From these tempestuous discussions, out of whose cauldron the academic discipline of film studies as we know it today was born, Meunier’s book seems singularly remote, whether geographically, institutionally, ideologically, or theoretically. Geographically, because he was based in the Belgian town of Leuven rather than in Paris or London, the 300-odd kilometers of distance keeping him safely ensconced from the critical combat of the larger metropolises. Institutionally, because, rather than the world of film criticism, he was operating in a university environment, with its more sedate pace of work and markedly different standards for the presentation of ideas. Ideologically, because, whereas the French and British critics saw the development of a theory of the cinema as an inherently political project, closely tied with a prospective revolutionary overturning of the capitalist system, Meunier’s work is deliberately detached from political questions, preferring instead to probe deeper, more unvarying aspects of human experience and the cinema. And finally, theoretically, because the conceptual apparatus dominating the Cahiers-Cinéthique-Screen variant of film theory, with its combination of the structuralist semiotics of Saussure and Barthes, the historical materialism of Marx and Althusser, and the psychoanalytic theory of Freud and Lacan, was not one shared by Meunier, who predominantly drew, for his study on ‘the film experience,’ on the theoretical corpus of the filmologie movement and, more fundamentally, on the phenomenology of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Husserl.

We could thus be tempted to firmly place Meunier’s work on one side of a theoretical divide that has characterized film theory – particularly in the French-speaking world – since the 1940s: that between a phenomenological and psychoanalytic approach to film spectatorship. If the former was prominent in the postwar period, with the work of Amédée Ayfre, Henri Agel, and, above all, André Bazin, by the late 1960s, the latter was in the
ascendancy, and came to overwhelmingly dominate the field in the 1970s and 1980s. Often, proponents of the ‘psychoanalytic’ paradigm of film studies subjected earlier phenomenological accounts of spectatorship to ridicule – infused, in their view, with the musty stench of antiquated ideas (although, in reality, not much more than a decade separated their respective heydays), and prone to the twin (and contradictory) offences of metaphysical idealism and mechanistic scientism. Film phenomenology became, as Dudley Andrew termed it in his 1978 article, little more than a “neglected tradition” in film studies.

By the end of the 1980s, however, the hegemonic position of the structuralist/psychoanalytic paradigm had been decisively overturned. Importantly, however, it was not supplanted by a new dominant theoretical trend, but by scholarly dispersion, a fragmenting of the field into multiple, jostling academic endeavors. Given that this dissipation coincided with a massive institutional inflation – both in the university system more generally, and in the discipline of film studies more specifically – a suitable allegory for this moment may be the Big Bang: from a dense, compact field of energy feeding in on itself, the study of cinema exploded, becoming an ever-expanding universe whose component parts have been rapidly moving away from one another, in a centrifugal process which, to this day, shows no signs of being reversed. Indeed, in retrospect, the period when this theoretical prism exerted a near-totalizing sway over the concerns and activities of the field can be seen as a fundamentally unique, never-to-be-repeated moment in the history of the discipline: film studies today is too vast, too polycentric, and too atomized to ever come under the dominance of a single set of ideas again. Among the constellation of theoretical schools to emerge in the wake of the structuralist/psychoanalytic moment, we can find the post-theory of David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, the ‘new film history’ of Tom Gunning, Charles Musser, André Gaudreault et al., cultural studies, media theory, and approaches inspired by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and others. We can also, thanks to a large degree to the efforts of Vivian Sobchack from the early 1990s onwards, observe a resurgence of the phenomenological investigation of film.

It is thus that phenomenology-inspired and psychoanalytic approaches to the study of cinema, and more particularly the experience of the film spectator, have predominantly been contrasted with one another, and held to be in an antagonistic relationship, vying for conceptual supremacy within the institutional framework of academic film studies. This, certainly, is the textbook account of how these two theoretical tendencies relate to each other, and such a viewpoint can be evinced in certain passages from the
proponents of these theories themselves. In *The Imaginary Signifier (Le Signifiant imaginaire)*, for instance (one of the tutor-texts of psychoanalytic film theory), Christian Metz caustically refers to phenomenological film theory as “the main form of idealism in cinematic theory” and characterizes it as a “cosmophanic conception” of cinema that registers “the ‘feeling’ of the deluded ego of the spectator.” At best, phenomenology can shed light on the functioning of the cinema in a symptomatic manner, because its “conceptual apparatus” is analogous to the “topographical apparatus” of film projection. But it suffers from a blind spot towards the “lure of the ego,” and is only of interest if its theoretical premises are inverted. Conversely, Sobchack defends the phenomenological model of cinematic identification she develops (partly on the basis of Meunier’s ideas) as an explicit alternative to the psychoanalytic model, and superior by dint of the fact that it “does not posit a single and totalizing structure of identification with the cinematic image, but rather differentiates among a variety of subjective spectatorial modes that co-constitute the cinematic object as the kind of cinematic object it is.” It thereby offers “a more dynamic, fluid and concrete description of film viewing than does its psychoanalytic counterpart” and “discloses rather than discounts” the “charge of the real” in cinema (and more particularly, documentary cinema). Elsewhere, the antipathy between these two tendencies manifests itself in the form of stony silence: scour the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* in its Marxist phase for discussions of the ideas of Husserl, Sartre, or Merleau-Ponty, even in the form of polemics against them – you will not find any.

I would nonetheless like to push back against this idea of an irremediable state of enmity, or irreconcilable discord, between phenomenology and psychoanalysis in film theory. For a start, as two ‘schools’ of thought, their philosophical heritage is, to a large degree, shared – we are not talking about the kind of epistemological chasm that has separated continental and analytic philosophy for more than a century. Indeed, there is much evidence of a state of mutual influence between these two theoretical branches. The harsh words of *The Imaginary Signifier* notwithstanding, Martin Lefebvre and Dominique Chateau have demonstrated the importance of Metz’s early phenomenological period for his later work, a debt that Metz himself readily recognized in interviews.

That phenomenology and psychoanalysis are more intertwined than is commonly assumed is also evident in the work of another seminal figure. With its emphasis on the role of the gaze in the formation of the subject and its discussion of visual systems of representation such as painting, the significance of Lacan’s *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of*
Psychoanalysis (Le Séminaire XI: Les quatres concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse, 1973) for film theory can hardly be overstated. Often overlooked, however, is the fact that, in this discussion, Lacan makes frequent reference to phenomenological thinkers. Sartre’s notion in Being and Nothingness (L’Être et le Néant, 1943), for instance, of the bidirectional nature of the gaze, and the element of surprise involved in the production of the gaze, are glowingly reiterated by Lacan, who states: “The gaze I encounter – you can find this in Sartre’s own writing – is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.” Similarly, Merleau-Ponty is a recurrent point of reference for the psychoanalyst: his understanding of the function of the gaze in works such as Phenomenology of Perception (Phénoménologie de la perception, 1945) and the posthumous The Visible and the Invisible (Le Visible et l’invisible, 1964) strains against the very limits of the phenomenological method, in Lacan’s view, by insisting that the subject is circumscribed by a gaze emanating from “the spectacle of the world.”

All this serves as contextual material for my main claim in this essay: that, in developing the notion of filmic identification by drawing on phenomenological and psychoanalytic theoretical foundations, Meunier’s The Structures of the Film Experience represents a missing link in the ‘family tree’ of film theory, bridging the gap between two theoretical tendencies that, rather than being counter-posed to each other, should most profitably be related to one another in a complementary, compatible fashion.

Identification in Film Theory

Ironically, it was at the same time as Meunier published his account that the notion of ‘identification’ in the psychoanalytic sense made a spectacular entry into the working lexicon of film theorists. In 1970, Tel Quel writer and novelist Jean-Louis Baudry – whose work was not, it must be said, particularly focused on questions of film theory prior to this point – published his “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus” article in issue no. 7-8 of Cinéthique, thereby effectively launching apparatus theory in film studies. There is much that we can find wanting in this brief yet dense article – most notably its reductive vision of the spectator’s relationship with the filmic image, and its terminological slippage between ‘ideology’ and ‘idealism’ – but there is no denying its enormous influence (an outsized influence, perhaps, when compared with the confidential reception of Meunier’s text), and the theoretical advances produced by the debates it
incited. Few, today, would sign up wholeheartedly to the propositions Baudry articulates, but his text remains a vital point of discussion in the field.

Central to this article is a grand analogy between the cinema spectator and the infant, aged 6-18 months, in the midst of Lacan’s ‘mirror stage,’ owing to the common presence of two physiological conditions: restricted mobility and heightened visual awareness. As with the child who, faced with their own mirror image, constructs a sense of a unified ego upon this basis, the film spectator develops a relationship of identification with the images projected onto the screen. But Baudry also distinguishes two levels of identification in this process, derived from the fact that, in the cinema “the reflected image is not that of the body itself but that of a world already given as meaning.” It is only on a secondary level that the spectator ‘identifies’ with the characters portrayed in the film; the primary identification in cinema-viewing is with the machinery of image-production, the camera. By standing in for what Baudry, following Husserl (in another point of convergence between phenomenology and psychoanalytic film theory) calls the “transcendental subject,” the camera fulfils the function of creating a unifying, centralizing meaning out of the perceptual shards of audiovisual imagery thrown onto the screen.

This gloss of identification in the cinema is widely known today. Its renown is partly due to Baudry’s ideas being taken up by Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier*, who reiterated the distinction between a primary level of identification (with the camera/projector, the cinematic apparatus), and a secondary level of identification with the various characters of a narrative-representative film. Like Baudry, Metz highlighted the fundamental difference between the cinema screen and the mirror, and thus pinpointed the limit-point where the analogy with the mirror-stage breaks down: as opposed to the mirror, the cinema screen “returns us everything but ourselves, because we are wholly outside it.” In Lacanian terms, whereas the mirror unambiguously exists within the order of the Imaginary, the cinema screen skirts the threshold between the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

This, then, is the model of identification that dominated considerations of film spectatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, and which continues to be one of the principal frameworks when questions of identification in the cinema are considered. In *The Structures of the Film Experience*, Meunier offers a markedly different theoretical model of filmic identification to that developed by Baudry and Metz. This is not to say, however, that there are not areas where the two overlap. Like Baudry and Metz, Meunier comes out against an overly positivistic account of film spectatorship, a shortcoming he ascribes to his predecessors in the *filmologie* movement, who were
excessively preoccupied with submitting the phenomena of film-viewing to supposedly empirical observation and quantification. In doing so, they earn the same reproach that phenomenologists have addressed to the scientific method in general. Phenomena such as film-viewing can only be adequately analyzed if the immediate lived experience of the subject is considered, rather than being subject to a pre-established objective schema, and this was, in Meunier's view, the primary cause for the limitations of the research experiments carried out by filmologists such as Albert Michotte van den Berck, Jean-Jacques Rinieri, and François Ricci.

Although phenomenology is the main guiding light of Meunier's study, he is not reticent to acknowledge that his notion of identification is ultimately drawn from Freud. This he has in common with Baudry and Metz. But, whereas the proponents of apparatus theory adopted a Lacanian outlook in their account of filmic identification (most notably through Lacan's essay on the mirror stage), Meunier turned to another follower of Freud, one whose influence on film theory has been far less prominent: Angelo Hesnard, and more particularly his 1957 book *Psychanalyse du lien interhumain* [*Psychanalyse of the Interhuman Link*]. Although they engaged in polemics with one another, Lacan and Hesnard were not personally hostile, and Hesnard, who was a co-founder of the Société psychanalytique de Paris in 1926, joined Lacan's École freudienne de Paris when the psychoanalytic movement in France split in 1964. But Hesnard's theoretical positions were still quite distinct from that of Lacan.

If we wish to map out schematically the conceptual lineages of the respective models of filmic identification offered by Meunier and Baudry/Metz, then we could give the following diagram:

```
Freud --> Hesnard --> Meunier
     |                      |
     v                      v
Baudry/Metz
```

Meunier draws on Hesnard for rectifying what he sees as some of the limitations of Freud's own conception of identification, chiefly through, in Meunier's words “rethinking the concept in the framework of a psychology enriched by the gains of phenomenological thinking” (p. 48). Whereas Freud still held to a model of self-contained, atomized egos, which can only relate to each other through the perception of common traits found in their (equally self-contained and atomized) fellow subjects, Hesnard, by contrast, develops a model of identification fundamentally based on a “primordial intersubjectivity” (p. 48). This emphasis on intersubjectivity
forms a significant demarcation point between Meunier’s account of filmic identification and that espoused by the apparatus theorists, whose topological models of film-viewing invariably posit a lone, isolated spectator subjected to cinematic imagery, the affective content of which is essentially indifferent.\(^{16}\)

Following Hesnard, Meunier highlights three aspects of identification: its motoric or postural aspect (our tendency to reproduce mimetically the movements or gestures of the person identified with), its affective aspect (eliciting either sympathy or antipathy in the subject), and its dramatic aspect (the fact that relations of identification are not stable and unchanging, but are subject to changes and events, which are frequently capable of altering the very nature of the relationship). Together, these three aspects contribute to the respective valorization or devalorization of the individuals identified with, thereby transforming anonymous intersubjectivity (the generic co-existence of subjects) into private intersubjectivity (the development of personal relationships founded on affective bonds).

Meunier's original move, then, is to apply a Hesnardian framework of identification, steeped in a phenomenological understanding of intersubjectivity, to the experience of film spectatorship, a step which distinguishes his project both from earlier studies of spectatorial empathy or emotional participation carried out by the filmologists, and from the contemporaneous Lacan-influenced view of identification developed by Baudry and others. For Meunier, identification in the filmic situation (the situation of the moviegoer) is a variant of the general mode of behavior that is identification. It does have one primary point of distinction from identification in day-to-day life, however: whereas, in ‘real’ situations, the parties of a reciprocal intersubjective relationship of identification are both present to each other, in filmic identification, one of the parties in this relationship does not assume the form of a flesh-and-blood human being, but is a spectral image projected onto a two-dimensional screen. They are, in Meunier’s words, “presented as not being present” (p. 119). Moreover, unlike Baudry and Metz, Meunier’s discussion of identification largely remains at the level of filmic diegesis – he opts not to take the step of locating an identification of the spectator with the mechanism of film projection itself.

**Meunier’s Three Modes of Identification**

It is at this point in his discussion that Meunier makes what is perhaps his most theoretically stimulating move, and the one which seems to have
elicited the most interest among followers of his such as Sobchack, as well as many other contributors to the present volume. Rather than consider the cinema as a unitary phenomenon, in which identification would play the same role regardless of the type of film under consideration, or tacitly take the traditional fiction film to stand in for all forms of cinema (a sin that can, not unjustifiably, be imputed to Baudry, Metz, and many others who have discussed filmic identification), Meunier proceeds to a tripartite typology of the different modalities of filmic identification, on the basis of the three overarching categories of film: the home movie, the documentary, and the fiction film.

In each of these three categories, the phenomenon of identification has markedly different effects on the film spectator. In the home movie, it serves primarily to evoke (or ‘presentify’) a person known to the viewer, enabling the viewer to recall past events or typical forms of behavior shown by the on-screen figure. In the documentary, identification has a didactic function: although we do not know the individuals shown in the film personally, they draw our interest by exemplifying a more general reality that is of concern to us, allowing us to deepen our knowledge of the world. Finally, in the fiction film, due to the fact that the filmic datum does not make reference to an existing reality, identification acts as a more individualized, affective relationship with the characters presented to us, which itself can take two forms: being-with (wherein we sympathize with the character but do not exhibit any tendency to transpose our own personality onto them) and being-like (in which a highly valorized, heroic character elicits a much more participatory mode of identification, beckoning us to ‘step into their shoes’). The French New Wave, indeed, gives us an excellent example of an obsessive form of ‘being-like’: in Jean-Luc Godard’s À bout de souffle (Breathless, 1960), Michel Poiccard, played by Jean-Paul Belmondo, happens upon a poster advertising the film The Harder They Fall (Mark Robson, 1956). Staring at the image of Humphrey Bogart emblazoned on the poster, Belmondo is transfixed by the image of a cinema icon on whose intra-filmic persona he has modeled his own behavior. Murmuring the name ‘Bogie,’ Belmondo motorically imitates the actor’s signature tic of tracing his thumb over his lips, in an overt act of identification with Bogart’s on-screen persona.

While the divide between fiction and documentary cinema is a mainstay of film theory, bringing in the home movie as a third category is a far more unusual move, and its inclusion is a major factor in the unique nature of Meunier’s study. Here, it should be recalled that Meunier does not use the regular French word for home movie (film amateur or film de famille) but a different term, film-souvenir, which more directly evokes the role of
memory in home movies. If we were looking for a more exact equivalent, we could perhaps proffer the term “keepsake-film” (or even the direct cognate: ‘souvenir-film’). A large part of the motivation for people to record, preserve, and watch home movies is precisely to retain a memento of key – or even mundane – moments in their lives. As such, the film-souvenir essentially functions as a fetish-object for the viewer. The film itself ends up standing in for a memory that – inherently unstable, unreliable, and ephemeral – resides just outside of our grasp. And yet, in attempting to capture a moment forever by recording it on film (or, more preponderantly today, digitally), we are always frustrated by its status as a pale substitute for the experience of the moment itself. This understanding of the film-souvenir as a fetish-object remains implicit in Meunier’s text, and is not directly broached by the author himself, but, given the importance of the notion of the fetish in both Marx (the discussion of ‘commodity fetishism’ in Volume 1 of Capital) and Freud (his essay on the fetish), it suggests another point of potential contact between film phenomenology and Marxist/psychoanalytic accounts of the cinema.\(^\text{17}\)

Although Meunier could be criticized for implicitly retaining a certain hierarchy of image forms, ascending from the ‘base’ form of home movies,
through the intermediary of documentary cinema, to the more ‘noble’ art of fiction film, recognition should be given to the very gesture of including home movies as an independent category, and dedicating a significant portion of his study to the format. That he did this in 1969 is particularly precocious: although 8mm cameras had been available for some time, it was only in the late 1960s that the Sony Portapak, the first video-camera intended for the consumer market, became commercially available. From a relatively niche pastime only accessible to middle-class families in Western countries, the ‘home movie’ has become a globalized cultural practice, with the ability to produce and disseminate moving images of reasonably high quality available to anyone with a smartphone in their pocket.¹⁸

In fact, if in 1969 Meunier could state that “through the importance of its on-screen representation, as well as through its consumption by the broader public, fiction evidently constitutes the principal sector of film production” (p. 128), we could well ask if, in 2019, this pecking order has been reversed. When compared with the sheer mass of audiovisual material available online, the vast majority of which is essentially ‘home movies,’ and the amount of time that individuals in contemporary societies spend producing and consuming this material, is it not the commercial fiction film that has become a minor, secondary variant of the cinematic image, and the home movie that has become its primary, even hegemonic manifestation?

Meunier in/and Film Theory: Further Questions

This is only one of the many questions that Meunier’s work inspires in the contemporary scholar of cinema. To end this essay, I want to raise a few scattered enquiries of my own, which were provoked as I consulted his book, and which I present now somewhat at random. The present preponderance of the home movie has, of course, been enabled by digital technology. While the technological conditions of image production are little discussed in The Structures of the Film Experience, we may well wonder if the transition from analogue home movies (whether Super-8 or VHS) to digital has had a significant effect on the function of identification for the viewer of such works. This can particularly come into play when watching home movies recorded many years earlier, in which their relationship to memory plays a particularly important role. I often tell my current crop of undergraduate students that they are the last generation who will know what it means to have a faded photograph of their childhood.
An uncanny cognate of the ‘fading’ of our own memories, the way our mental images become progressively blurred and indistinct over time, the patina of the past produced by the drained colors or sepia tones of old home movies and photographs is lost with the rise of eternally crisp, eternally ‘now’ digital imagery. Does the advent of the digital home movie, then, change anything in what Meunier has to say about identification with the *film-souvenir*?

On an unrelated note, Meunier’s discussion of identification often seems to evoke its flipside, denial (or *Verleugnung* in Freud’s terminology). It is curious, however, that the only time he explicitly raises the question of denial, he refuses its pertinence. Belief in the cinema, as Meunier recognizes, is not a totalizing phenomenon. A film is not a hallucination; no matter how immersed we may be in the on-screen events, we never entirely lose sight of their status as images projected on a screen. As Meunier notes, we frequently provoke ruptures in our belief in the film, often when the situation presented becomes emotionally unbearable (he mentions the dramatic intensity of Boris’s death in Mikhail Kalatozov’s *The Cranes Are Flying* [*Letyat zhuravi*, 1957] by way of example). As a form of consolation, the viewers tear away from their fascination with the film and say to themselves: “It’s just a movie.” As Meunier notes, however, this moment of spectatorial rupture is not an act of denial: we are not denying a real event, but are instead withdrawing from the imaginary world of the film, in order to return to our real existence as a viewer sitting before a screen. On a broader level, however, I still wonder whether a phenomenon of denial is taking place in this process of spectatorial vacillation between a ‘belief’ in the on-screen world and a detachment from the film’s diegesis. Again, a text contemporaneous with Meunier’s seems to be of striking relevance here: in 1969, the Lacan disciple Octave Mannoni, in *Clefs pour l’imaginaire ou L’Autre Scène*, discussed Freudian *Verleugnung* in terms of a process whereby the patient under analysis says to themselves: “I know very well..., but all the same...” (*Je sais bien..., mais quand même...*).¹⁹ As Pascal Bonitzer and Serge Daney were quick to recognize, this formulation has particular pertinence for the mode of existence of the film-viewer, constantly prone to thinking, in essence, “I know very well that it’s just a film, but all the same, it seems so real.”²⁰

At many moments in Meunier’s text, this oscillatory mode of spectatorial behavior seems germane to his discussion. Indeed, it is notable that he rejects an equivalence between the film and the dream in favor of an analogy between cinema and child’s play. Unlike the film, the dream exerts a total hold over the dreamer – we almost never tell ourselves during the dream
that “it’s all a dream”, or when this does happen, it usually provokes us to wake up. By contrast, belief in cinema is rather akin to the ‘belief’ of the child during role-playing games such as ‘cowboys and Indians’ or ‘cops and robbers.’ As Meunier puts it:

The child who plays ‘cowboys and Indians’ never ceases to regard his behavior as imaginary, but this does not negate the fact that during the game – that is, until the moment when he decides to stop playing – the child ‘believes’ that he is a ‘cowboy,’ and ‘believes’ that his fellow players are ‘Indians.’ He is fascinated by the unreal world created by the game, just as the spectator is fascinated by the unreal world of the screen. Both act ‘as if’ the unreal were real. In other terms, they confer a ‘believed’ existence on objects that they never cease to regard as imaginary (p. 95).

I find this analogy to be a seductive one. Compared with the model of the cinema-viewer as equivalent to an infant in the mirror-stage, it at least has the merit of raising us from the level of a one-year-old baby to that of a six- or seven-year-old child! The flipside, of course, is that, unlike the child playing cowboys and Indians, who has no restrictions on their mobility during the game, the film-viewer pinned to their seat is still, as Baudry reminds us, motorically immature, and during the projection we are severely limited in the movements we can make in our mimetic identification with the on-screen figures.

Finally, while for the purposes of conceptual clarity Meunier presents his three “orders” of filmic identification as schematically divorced from one another, it is hard to dispute that it is the mixed cases, in which the documentary, fiction, and home-movie modes of identification interfere with and “contaminate” each other, that are of most theoretical interest for scholars today. Sobchack has already written at length on the experience of actress Cindy Williams when confronted with images of herself in the series *Laverne & Shirley* – effectively responding to a fictional TV show as a *film-souvenir*, a “diary of her life,” as the actress herself termed it. 21 Sobchack’s example also evokes a more canonical moment in film history, which would have been fresh in the mind when Meunier was writing *The Structures of the Film Experience*.

In the 1966 film *Persona*, Ingmar Bergman made the striking formal innovation of including a close-up in the film which merged the faces of its two main actresses (Liv Ullmann and Bibi Andersson), highlighting the (supposedly) more unflattering side of each of their faces. In Bergman’s own telling, he showed this mongrel image to the actresses during the
editing of the film, and both of them thought the image was that of the other actress:

We set the machine running, and Liv said, “Oh look, what a horrible picture of Bibi!” And Bibi said, “No, it’s not me, it’s you!” Then the picture stopped. Everyone’s face has a better and a worse side, and the picture is a combination of Bibi’s and Liv’s less attractive sides. At first they were so scared they didn’t even recognize their own faces. What they should have said was: “What the hell have you done with my face?” But they didn’t! They didn’t recognize their own faces. I find that rather an odd reaction.22

In this anecdote – and there is no way of verifying whether such an exchange actually took place, but se non é vero, é ben trovato – the oscillation between identification and denial, or what Hesnard calls the “dialectic of the alter and the ego” plays out in the most fascinating of ways.23 In forming a ‘missing link’ between the psychoanalytic and phenomenological paradigms of film theory, the value today of Meunier’s book, I would contend, lies precisely in providing us with a set of theoretical tools for grappling with such moments of sublime uncanniness in the cinema.
Notes


2. It should be noted, however, that 1969 was also the year that the French university system, after the post-1968 restructuring, opened itself up to teaching film studies, with programs initiated at Paris-III and Paris-VIII. Many of the new film courses were instructed by present and former critics for Cahiers, Cinéthique, and Positif.

3. While Bazin himself was not, strictly speaking, a phenomenologist, his ideas were deeply influenced by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Mikel Dufrenne, and he was in dialogue with other film phenomenologists of the era, such as Ayfre and Agel.


5. Indeed, Julian Hanich and Christian Ferencz-Flatz have persuasively argued for seeing the early 1990s as on par with the immediate postwar period as the two key dates in the emergence of film phenomenology. See Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich, “What Is Film Phenomenology?”, Studia Phaenomenologica XVI (2016), pp. 11-61.


16. This is not to say that intersubjectivity is conceptually alien to the structuralist Marxism that underpinned apparatus theory. In “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’état (Notes pour une recherche)” (written in January-April 1969), Louis Althusser’s claim that the formation of subjectivity requires the “interpellation” of individuals as subjects has profound affinities with the phenomenological understanding of intersubjectivity. But, in contrast to Meunier’s phenomenology, Althusser’s notion of interpellation offers a profoundly political account of intersubjective relations. As his example of the police officer “hailing” a suspect on the street shows, the confrontation between subjectivities is invariably (in class societies, at least) an encounter between the dominant and the dominated, and is subtended by the latent threat of violence.

17. Indeed, one of the former writers for *Cahiers du cinéma* during its Marxist-Leninist period, Pierre Baudry, would later devote a significant article to the distinction between home movies (which he calls “private cinema”) and commercial films (“public cinema”), on the basis of the audience for which they were intended: that is, whether it consisted of people who were known or unknown to the filmmaker. Within the micro-field of home-movie studies, this text has some interesting parallels with Meunier’s study. See Pierre Baudry, “Se voir,” *La Revue Documentaires* no. 9 (September 1994), pp. 63-77.

18. Even as late as the early 1990s, the expense of video cameras meant that owning one was an impossible dream for a child from a suburban working-class family in Australia, such as myself.


23. Hesnard, Psychanalyse du lien interhumain, p. 26. This is also discussed by Meunier, p. 44.

About the author

Daniel Fairfax is Assistant Professor in Film Studies at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, having completed his PhD in Film Studies and Comparative Literature at Yale University in 2017. His research focuses on French film theory in the post-1968 period, and for the University of Amsterdam, he has been responsible for editing and translating Cinema against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology by Jean-Louis Comolli (2015) and Conversations with Christian Metz: Selected Interviews on Film Theory (1970-1991) (2017, with Warren Buckland). His monograph The Red Years of Cahiers du cinéma (1968-1973) will be published by Amsterdam University Press in 2019. Daniel is also an editor of and regular contributor to the Australian online film journal Senses of Cinema (www.sensesofcinema.com).