You Talkin’ to Me? On Filmic Identification in Video-Selfies

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Abstract
The present paper revisits Jean Pierre-Meunier’s account of the social structure of film experience by adding a further term to his comparative analysis of home movies, documentaries, and films of fiction: video-selfies. Video-selfies are understood as the perfect starting point for an interpretation of the mutual relationships between authorship, protagonists, and viewer, which aims to clarify Meunier’s conception of ‘filmic identification’ critically. The analysis of the video-selfies focuses on five aspects: perception, communication, affect, space, and movement. Following through this analysis, the paper shows that Meunier’s approach can be useful not only in applying a theory of intersubjectivity to various forms of film experience, but also in drawing from the latter insights into key aspects of intersubjectivity.

Keywords: Phenomenology; intersubjectivity; communication; mirror perception

Jean-Pierre Meunier’s analysis of film experience is most notable, on the one hand, in that it regards the social, that is: the intersubjective structure of this experience as its most defining aspect; on the other hand, in that it pursues this aspect by means of a phenomenological variation, contrasting three forms of film experience, namely the home movie, the documentary, and the fiction film. Arguably, the most striking feature of this endeavor is its attempt to translate a theoretical framework visibly drawn from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology into the classical vocabulary of French filmology by specifically rephrasing the phenomenological account of

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‘intersubjectivity’ in terms of filmic ‘identification’ – today, one would certainly find it more appealing to proceed in the opposite direction. In his treatment of ‘identification,’ Meunier himself, in any case, rejects the default psychoanalytic understanding of the term as an objective psychological mechanism, which can be analyzed from without, in favor of its phenomenological interpretation as a subjective experience, which should be described from within. Accordingly, he comes to regard the subject’s bodily, that is, motor and postural response to his encounter of other subjects as the grounding phenomenon of identification, while also pointing out its emotional, dramatic, and axiological aspects.

The second and richest part of his account applies this theoretical framework to film experience, stipulating from the onset that the latter can only be analyzed as such by taking into account its most significant variations. To this extent, Meunier sets out to investigate the differences that occur, firstly, in the structure of perception and movement, and secondly, in that of intersubjective identification, between home movies, documentaries, and fiction films. To be sure, the definitions given to these three categories are rather rough-hewn. Thus, according to Meunier, home movies are characterized primarily by the fact that their subject is known and real; in documentaries, the subject is unknown and real, and in films of fiction it is flatly unreal. However, the most significant point here is that, in Meunier’s view, these differences necessarily entail a correspondingly different intersubjective experience and therefore also a differently structured experience of film. Thus, the experience of home movies is, according to Meunier, fundamentally driven by the viewer’s effort to rememorize the person depicted in it – documentary film-viewing engages an attempt to understand that person, while fiction films demand the viewer to participate in the unfolding of the character’s situation.

For sure, two main methodological objections can be raised against such an account from a phenomenological perspective. On the one hand, one may wonder to what extent this presentation still holds true to the promise of its title, namely to outline the structures of ‘the’ film experience phenomenologically. Does this perspective still allow envisaging film experience as such, as an overarching invariant, or are we, on the contrary, only left with classifying a variety of possible film experiences? On the other hand, if this latter is the case, are Meunier’s three categories even sufficient? Is one not implicitly led to differentiate the structural characteristics of each of these categories further and further into a variety of subcategories, while also adding countless other similar categories, such that, in the end, the very task of a ‘structural’ analysis of film experience seems to be thrown overboard?
With these two questions in mind, I will, in the following, try to point out an important omission in Meunier’s reflections on filmic intersubjectivity. In doing so, however, I will simultaneously acknowledge his achievement by making use of a similar approach in adding a new term to his comparative list of typical film experiences: the video-selfie.

2.

In his brief analysis of home movies, Meunier makes the following description of their markedly evocative viewing experience:

As for each of the gestures that I see on the screen, I do not apprehend them in their own individuality, but as representations of multiple gestures in reality. It matters little whether the person represented carries out a given particular activity. The activity in itself is of no interest. What interests me is to find, through the manner in which this particular activity is accomplished, a more general mode of behavior, repeatedly perceived in the absent person. In short, what I seek to render present to myself is the person-in-general, such as I knew him in the multiple real perceptions that I have had of him (p. 88).

One can almost picture the scene referred to in this description: a nostalgic viewer endlessly re-watching the same old footage of a departed friend or spouse, while completely disregarding the particular content of the tape in his sole interest to retrieve the shard of real presence preserved on film. As touching and theoretically rewarding as this scene might be, it describes only a very particular experience of watching a home movie, as several of the papers in the present volume aptly point out. Watching a tape of my friend’s wedding, which I could not attend, for instance, or some forgotten recordings from my childhood both entail viewing experiences that are hardly captured by Meunier’s descriptions. One could, on the one hand, pinpoint the issue at stake here by simply noting that these descriptions in fact only apply to “watching our own home movies,” as Vivian Sobchack puts it. In a somewhat broader perspective, one could, on the other hand, stress the fact that home movies are as such only meant for a limited ‘intended audience,’ while the viewing experience of a third party would be different not least because it would always also contain an element of “trespassing.” The fact is, in any case, that both formulations bring into play a further dimension in the social structure of the home-movie experience in addition to the viewer’s apprehension of the film’s protagonist, discussed by Meunier. This may concern the viewer's
relationship to the author of that film (as implied when speaking of ‘our own’ home movies), or both the protagonist and the author’s intentionality of their expected viewers (as implied when speaking of an ‘intended audience’). What I mean to say here is that the social structure of a home movie – and, in further consequence, that of film experience in general – involves, from the outset, a more complex set of intentional relationships than just the sheer ‘identification’ of the viewer with the character, by specifically connecting the author, the protagonist, and the viewer in an intricate triangle of mutual references.

3.

Of course, this observation is, to a certain degree, commonplace in film theory. As such, it is, for instance, already implicit in Christian Metz’s attempt to complicate the question of filmic identification by putting it in relation to the so-called “identification with the camera.” Instead, the point here is that, when considered in the perspective of the home-movie experience, the entire discussion shifts focus from the mere formal determinations of the cinematic apparatus to the concrete social intentionalities involved – and this is precisely the point at which one can also fruitfully bring into play video-selfies. In fact, paradoxically, video-selfies are the perfect starting point for an analysis of the intersubjective structure of film experience precisely because they do not necessarily involve other people. As such, they offer a double advantage: they allow us to pose the question of filmic intersubjectivity strictly as a matter of structural relationships, and not as a matter of relationships between people, while they are particularly prone to be tackled phenomenologically by referring solely to the experience of a single subject. Thus, if we regard video-selfies in their most basic form as films whose author, protagonist, and primary viewer are virtually one and the same individual subject, their phenomenology – which I will now try to pinpoint in five sketchy descriptions, focused on: perception, communication, affect, space, and movement – can easily show that the structure of mutual relationships they involve are by no means less rich or intricate than in the apparently more complex case of a feature film of fiction.

a. Perception

First of all, recording a video-selfie normally implies the use of a mirror or monitor reflection. Thus, the first and most elementary form of intersubjectivity it involves is the sheer perceptual exchange of the look into a
mirror. This exchange has often been described. It is based on the dialectic of seeing and being seen. When looking from here at my reflection in the mirror there, I come to see myself back here from over there in following the reflection. This experience therefore necessarily entails a certain reversibility of perspectives, a mutual exchange between seeing and being seen, which is, above all, the defining feature of social interaction. Now, when recording a video-selfie, this relationship obviously becomes more complex. For, here, the subject no longer only regards, but also films him- or herself, and he or she is no longer only seen, but also poses for the camera, while the two gestures – that of filming and that of posing – both involve, in addition to their mutual reference to one another, an intentional reference to a future viewer. Of course, this viewer may not be considered explicitly and may not even be a different person at all, but the anticipation of a future viewing is as such nevertheless structurally implicit in the very act of recording something with a camera, just as it is in the act of, say, smiling for the camera. Moreover, the two gestures, that of filming and that of posing, are here not only themselves engaged in a dialectic of reversibility that reduplicates the original dialectic of the mirror reflection, but this dialectical relationship is as such also visibly captured on film in the composite expression of the protagonist, who is at the same time engaged in filming and posing for the camera. This unique expression, in which the intention of filming struggles with that of posing, arguably offers the most remarkable perceptual feature of selfies in general and video-selfies in particular, which, above all, prevents their superficial comparison to traditional self-portraits.

b. Communication

Secondly, the intersubjective intentionality of a video-selfie is recognizable in its specific form of communicative address. For sure, address can take various forms in a video-selfie depending on whether it is intended as a video message, a vlog post, a first-person documentary, or a live report. The important point here is that, regardless of such differences, the act of address is performed by a subject who films while regarding him- or herself in the mirror, and this specific circumstance also marks the communicative performance through and through. To be sure, the subject of a video-selfie does not simply address him- or herself, just as a TV presenter addressing viewers does not simply address the cameraperson. But, while indeed primarily addressing the intended viewer via the camera, the TV presenter is nevertheless in an ongoing agreement, that is: in a communicative or cooperative relationship with the cameraperson, which might not be
immediately recognizable in his or her performance for the viewer, but which is nevertheless a distinctive part of its intersubjective complexity. Similarly, the fact that the communicative gesture of a video-selfie is marked by a permanent ascertainment of oneself in the mirror – that is, by perceptual exchanges with oneself that imprint on that performance – inevitably makes it acquire, to a certain degree, communicative qualities specific to mirror experiences. For instance, it is certain that part of the bashfulness of practicing a speech in front of the mirror implicitly stems from the ridicule of addressing oneself in general – for one of course already knows in advance what one might be saying, so that the gesture of speaking is, in front of oneself as an audience, unneeded and tends to fall flat. Thus, one might say, it is precisely due to this that a certain aspect of blankness and redundancy still implicitly characterizes the communicative performance of video-selfies in general, regardless of how well the subject has adapted to the medium.

c. Affect

Thirdly, the same feature also determines the affective dimension of intersubjectivity in video-selfies. Thus, it is well known that audiovisual recordings are generally better suited than sheer mirror reflections for assessing one's own performances. This is the case because they allow the subject to view him- or herself from the outside without constantly lapsing into the corresponding perspective from the inside. On the other hand, it is presumably because, in contrast to mirror reflections, recordings lack the possibility of (literal) identification, that one often experiences a certain discomfort when watching oneself in a recording. This embarrassment is indisputably increased in an intersubjective context. For, if I as a subject may already feel some unease when privately regarding my own recorded image – an image of myself that I can no longer adjust by self-composure as in the case of mirror images – the embarrassment is distinctly enhanced in the presence of others, who witness not just my embarrassing image itself, over which I am now powerless, but also my own embarrassment in relation to it. One could certainly point to a similarly complex interweaving of self-perception and intersubjectivity in the embarrassment one feels when surprised by others while preening in the mirror. In any case, if one may concede that this unease is to a certain degree culturally and historically determined, it nevertheless constitutes the indispensable affective background for grasping the fact that video-selfies at core amount to sharing with others the private or intimate act of watching oneself in the mirror. Of course, one might
hardly take notice of this fact when watching a video-selfie, as one might easily lose track of the circumstance that one’s interlocutor in a video-call is – just like oneself – simultaneously regarding him- or herself in a monitor image. Nevertheless, these relationships fundamentally impact on the intersubjective affectivity of both, embroiling the viewing I, the viewed I, and the other in specific constellations of mutual reference.

d. Space

Fourthly, the aforementioned social structure of video-selfies also determines how we experience their specific spatial structure. Thus, one could go as far as saying that a film recorded by its protagonist as a video-selfie presents an entirely different experience of its film space than the exact same shot recorded by a different person. This is again the case, above all, because of the sheer fact that, in recording it, the protagonist films using a mirror. For this of course implies from the outset that the protagonist him- or herself also sees what we see. That is: he or she is not only the protagonist of the shot, but also its author and moreover, not only its author, but also our fellow spectator, with whom we actually share that specific view. Instead, insofar as the film essentially reflects what the protagonist him- or herself is seeing, the image itself can be interpreted at the same time both as an objective shot and as a subjective, point-of-view shot. In other words, it can be read both straightforwardly and in reverse, as a mirror view, even if the camera itself is of course not facing a mirror and even if it only films what it would also film if it were held by a different person. As a consequence of this ambiguity, the spatial positions of the protagonist and of the camera in relation to one another virtually become mutually interchangeable, such that, we could say, the protagonist can be apprehended at the same time in front and behind the camera, on and off screen, making the film image attain a strange sense of sphericity and enclosement.

e. Movement

Finally, a similar consequence can be derived with regard to the apperception of movement – and this includes both camera movements and the movements of the protagonist, which are here brought to coincide. Thus, on the one hand, the movements of the protagonist do not normally relate to their surrounding environment in a direct and unmediated fashion, but – insofar as the protagonist is continuously paying attention to the camera – only in relation to its mirror reflection, just like a car driven
backwards while watching the rear mirror. Thus, the vantage point of the camera becomes, as in a rear mirror, the reference point for the orientation and interaction of the protagonist with his or her environment, conferring them a specific phenomenological deflection. Alternatively, this complex perceptual situation also renders the apperception of camera movements proper particularly complex – as becomes obvious, for instance, when considering GoPro video-selfies. For, in such a video-selfie, the camera in fact expresses the view of the protagonist not as a sheer extension of his or her sight, that is: as a direct prolongation of his own point of view, and thus as a simple form of “instrument mediated perception,” but instead as a second, juxtaposed point of view added to his or her body, which parallels and mirrors the first, while all camera movements are kinesthetically ambiguous in that they can be read reversibly both in view of their anchoring in the point of view of the camera and in that of the opposing protagonist handling it.

4.

An in-depth phenomenological analysis would have to work out the articulations of these five moments in more detail in order to show how video-selfies bring about an entirely novel entanglement between the subjects' experience of themselves and their relationship to others: the equivocal experience of simultaneously watching oneself in showing oneself to others and of showing oneself to others in regarding oneself. What our brief observations have already shown, however, is that this line of inquiry obviously goes beyond the classical objection brought against filmic identification. According to this objection, the traditional treatment of identification by film theory only tackles the viewer's empathic engagement with the protagonist (secondary identification) while ignoring his or her grounding engagement with the camera (primary identification). In contrast to this, our present reflections have shown that primary and secondary identification are both insufficient to account for the social structure of film experience insofar as this experience is generally not reducible to the intentionalities of the viewer alone. In other words, it is not just the viewer who willingly or unwillingly ‘identifies’ with the protagonist and with the camera, but it is also the latter two who ‘identify’ with each other – and this is, in fact, precisely the point at which one could show that primary and secondary identification are fundamentally interlinked. For as long as the viewer ‘identifies with the protagonist,’ the protagonist’s relationship to the camera in turn becomes part of how the viewer apprehends the camera, and insofar
as the viewer ‘identifies with the camera,’ the camera and the cameraperson’s relationship to the protagonist become an integral part of how the viewer relates to the character. In short: the social structure of the film experience essentially depends on how these mutual intentionalities are functionally interwoven. But, since this web of intersubjective relationships is certainly quite differently woven in video-selfies than, say, documentaries or films of fiction, the purpose of pointing this out cannot be – as already resulted from Meunier’s considerations – that of defining an invariant, structural feature common to film experience in general. Instead, this approach could prove useful in two regards.

On the one hand, it could offer a theoretical framework better suited for specifically grasping possible variations in the social structure of film experience. For, indeed, since the structural relations between author(s), protagonist(s), and viewer(s) – in other words: the grounding interconnection between the social experience of filming and that of film-viewing – are by far not as neatly recognizable in the case of most types of documentaries and films of fiction as in that of home movies or video-selfies, it is only in contrasting them to one another that those structures become visible in their specificity. One could thus, for instance, take a most basic element of documentary filmmaking like the interview as a starting point for phenomenologically illustrating how the viewer’s experience varies with the precise distribution of the interlocutors’ intentionalities in addressing each other, respectively the viewer via the camera between an observational style recording of a discussion, a TV interview, an election show, or an Interrotron-interview by Errol Morris. The least one could observe in performing such a variation is that the interviewer and the interviewee generally differ in their relationship to the camera, insofar as the interviewer does not simply occupy the position of a ‘protagonist,’ as does the interviewee, but he or she is at the same time to some extent an agent of the ‘authorship.’ Thus, the mutual interrelation between viewer, author, and protagonist is obviously marked here by the fact that the latter two terms are more ambiguously structured and intertwined, while this structural complexity is undeniably pushed even further in the case of fiction films. For, since, in a regular fiction film, all protagonists in fact have a share in the authorship as actors, while being pure protagonists as characters, the viewer’s experience of the film is simultaneously determined by the camera’s non-existence for the character and by the actor’s expressive and cooperative performance in relation to the camera, which defines that non-existence. Therefore, the social structure of the fiction film experience fundamentally varies not only with the explicit acknowledgement of the camera by the character,
but implicitly also with the complexities of the relationship between the camera's behavior and the actor's expressivity in relation to it.

Be this as it may, however, such an approach is – as already stated – just one possible way of fructifying these considerations, and not the most philosophically rewarding in my regard. For, in fact, studying the social structure of film experience might prove not just a matter of applying prior philosophical theories on intersubjectivity to the case of film, but instead properly speaking also a way of uncovering novel and differently structured forms of social experience, as I briefly began to suggest here with regard to video-selfies. If this is indeed the case, then decoding these experiences could actually become a means for enriching and challenging those philosophical theories themselves. Speaking about video in the early 1990s, Vilém Flusser claims: “whenever gestures appear that have never been seen before, we have the key to decoding a new form of existence. The gesture involved in manipulating a video camera represents in part a change to a traditional gesture. According to the hypothesis just presented, then, one way of deciphering our current existential crisis is to observe this gesture.” As our reflections above have shown, the same statement could go for video-selfies as well, which are themselves, no doubt, “a change to a traditional gesture” that promises access to entirely novel experiences of sociality. If this is indeed the case, however, then the main question we should first and foremost pose with regard to Meunier’s book concerns the extent to which reflecting on its second part and further developing it could also prove fruitful for expanding the scope of the first part.

Notes

1. See the essays by Vivian Sobchack and Marie-Aude Baronian.
6. For sure, one might be reluctant to claim that mirror reflections involve an intersubjective experience since they only engage the subject in relation to
him- or herself and not to others. However, there are at least three arguments to support such a claim. First of all, mirrors have an obvious preparatory social function: they anticipate others in that they allow the subject from the outset to regard him- or herself as he or she will be regarded by them. Secondly, mirrors are genetically linked to social interaction, since, as is well known, the ability to recognize one’s own mirror image develops in children simultaneously with an extended ability for social cognition. Finally, the experience of regarding oneself in the mirror shares the phenomenological structure of an intersubjective experience, insofar as it involves the same reciprocity and reversibility of perceiving and being perceived. This latter point especially is at the core of my argument above. Cf. for this also Beata Stawarska, “Mutual Gaze and Social Cognition,” *Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, 5 (2006), pp. 17-30 and Christian Ferencz-Flatz, “Abnormality and Perceptual Communication: Husserl on Exchanging Glances with Animals,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 80/1 (2018), pp. 73-92.

7. The intersubjective structure of the mirror experience thus finds its most visible expression, from a phenomenological perspective, in the dialectic movement by which the viewing I constantly lapses into the viewed I and vice versa. One can vividly experience this reversion when practicing a speech or an act in front of the mirror. For, in striving to dissociate oneself from the viewed I so as to perceive oneself as another, the viewing I cannot maintain this posture in front of the mirror for long without constantly falling into the position of the viewed I with every gesture, statement, or grimace. Hence, the awkwardness that makes it, to a certain degree, easier to perform an act directly in front of others rather than to practice it in front of the mirror. This observation might shed an interesting light on Robert de Niro’s famous mirror monologue in *Taxi Driver* (1976), not because the film accurately illustrates the aforementioned awkwardness, but on the contrary because it is completely lacking in it and the character addresses himself as another in front of the mirror with an estrangement that can only be attained by highly trained actors or madmen, while the scene can be for sure read as testifying to both.

8. See the essay by Vivian Sobchack in this volume.


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