Whose Identification? A Brief Meditation on the Relevance of Jean-Pierre Meunier’s *The Structures of the Film Experience* to Contemporary Feminist Film Phenomenology

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**Abstract**

This essay responds to Meunier’s *The Structures of the Film Experience* from the perspective of feminist phenomenological film theory, whose development from the early 1990s onward it begins by tracing. It argues that Meunier’s employment of Angelo Hesnard’s phenomenological understanding of identification in *Psychanalyse du lien interhumain* (1957) offers a more promising way for historical film phenomenology to engage with current queer and feminist work in the field than does the scientifically skeptical response to queer and feminist film phenomenologies outlined by Christian Ferencz-Platz and Julian Hanich in their 2016 essay “What is Film Phenomenology?” It draws on feminist phenomenologist Sandra Bartky’s essay “Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness” (1975) in support of this claim.

**Keywords:** Feminist phenomenology; feminist consciousness; female viewing subject; existential ethics; Sandra Bartky; Angelo Hesnard

**Introduction: Feminist Film Phenomenology in History**

My primary connection to film phenomenology is the work collected in my *The Body and the Screen: Female Subjectivities in Contemporary Women’s Cinema*. This book comprises a set of readings of films directed by mostly well-known women filmmakers that is prefaced by a philosophical chapter...
on theories of female subjectivity and a historico-critical chapter that attempts to trace a genealogy of feminist film philosophy, which (it finds) overlaps to a considerable degree with recent work in film phenomenology. I am actually more inclined to describe myself as a feminist phenomenologist than as a film phenomenologist, but have accepted the invitation to consider how Jean-Pierre Meunier’s important volume *The Structures of the Film Experience* can inform and contribute to the feminist phenomenological strand of film theory I outline in the second chapter of *The Body and the Screen* for two reasons: first, I am a feminist phenomenologist who works particularly with French cinema and French film theory, as well as film theory and film philosophy more generally, and second, two of my publications gain a mention in the excellent editorial introduction to the recent issue of *Studia Phaenomenologica* written by Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich, which bears the reassuringly open title “What Is Film Phenomenology?” If only on this account, I must, it seems, be some kind of film phenomenologist.

Since the literature in which feminism and queer theory have begun to intersect with film phenomenology is not widely discussed in this volume, I shall begin with a brief summary of the history of feminist phenomenology. Although it may be dated to the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*) in 1949, or even earlier to the work of Husserl’s doctoral student and assistant Edith Stein in the late 1910s, it did not really have an academic profile until 1980, when Iris Marion Young’s essay “Throwing Like a Girl: a Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality” was first published, followed four years later by Judith Butler’s “Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. Then, as I chart in *The Body and the Screen*, “the first book on [feminist phenomenology] in English was Linda Fisher and Lester Embree’s co-edited *Feminist Phenomenology*, which was based on a symposium held in 1994, and the 2000s and 2010s have seen a steady growth of publication in the area and the formation of a Society for Interdisciplinary Feminist Phenomenology at the University of Oregon.” Film phenomenology, as Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich set out in the introduction to their recent issue of *Studia Phaenomenologica*, took off in earnest in the late 1940s when Gilbert Cohen-Séat founded the Institut de Filmologie at the Sorbonne: many phenomenologically oriented essays appeared in the *Revue internationale de filmologie* during the fourteen years that this journal was published in Paris, including those by Henri Wallon and Albert Michotte van den Berck referred to by Meunier in *The Structures of the Film Experience*. 
I entirely agree with Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich that there are “two decisive moments in film phenomenology’s history: the years of 1946ff (with 1947 as the key moment) and 1990ff (with 1992 as the crucial date).” But my feminist phenomenological perspective on film phenomenology’s history leads me to see the 1992 publication of Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye*, which draws on Iris Marion Young’s take-up of Merleau-Ponty’s and Simone de Beauvoir’s phenomenology in the late 1970s and 1980s, and an article by Gaylyn Studlar in the special 1990 issue of the *Quarterly Review of Film and Television* on “Phenomenology in Film and Television,” mentioned by Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich as marking out not just the second key intersection of phenomenological philosophy with film studies in the twentieth century, but the initial encounter of feminist film studies with phenomenological philosophy. What I call “the feminist phenomenological strand of film theory/philosophy” probably counts as many feminist philosophers in its number – de Beauvoir, Sandra Bartky, Iris Young, Luce Irigaray, Sonia Kruks – as it does film philosophers – Vivian Sobchack, Gaylyn Studlar, Laura Marks, and Jennifer Barker – but at least some of the second group would, I feel sure, describe themselves as feminists, despite the different object(s) of their philosophical attention not entailing the same degree of engagement with female identity and female subjectivity.

*The Body and the Screen* is concerned above all with the subjectivities of female characters, directors, and writers, but here, as part of the dialogue with Meunier’s *The Structures of the Film Experience*, I want to take up an issue I fairly explicitly set aside in the book – the female viewer. I term ‘her’ “the female viewing subject,” rather than “the female spectator” in order to distinguish a phenomenological approach to filmic identification (including Meunier’s) from the approach to spectatorship pursued during the era of psychoanalytic/semiotic/ Marxist film theory that prevailed from about 1970 until at least the late 1980s.

**Identification in *The Structures of the Film Experience***

Can Meunier’s book contribute to an account of viewing au féminin? Addressing this question will turn around the concept of identification and the way it is employed by Meunier in *The Structures of the Film Experience*, which is not presented as exclusively phenomenological. Early in his book, he says that “depending on the subjacent theoretical conceptions or the nuanced considerations of the process, [identification] also goes by the names of ‘emotional participation,’ ‘projection’ or ‘empathy’. (p. 32) A little later, he states
In their rush to apply the process of identification to the filmic situation, the majority of studies dedicated to the problem have, it seems, abusively simplified the data. Often, the original form of the Freudian mechanism has been ‘transplanted’ into the filmic situation without any changes. But this neglects the fact that the mechanism in question, in the framework of developments in psychoanalysis and other theoretical tendencies, had itself undergone various retouches, and nourished numerous controversies, and that it was thus rather hasty to utilize the notion of identification without subjecting it to a prior critical examination. (p. 33)

Meunier’s mention here of “various retouches” made to the mechanism of identification theorized by Freud, and to the “numerous controversies” nourished by it, seems to allude principally to phenomenology – Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, certainly, but also other mid-twentieth century deployments of phenomenological philosophy. In effect, what Meunier does in this statement is steer carefully around one or more troubled chapters in the history of the concept of identification and turn a page (as it were) to a new chapter, in which he will deploy it in quite a singular way. This singularity, however, is not so much his own as Angelo Hesnard’s in *Psychanalyse du lien interhumain* (*Psychoanalysis of the Interhuman Link*), a source Meunier quotes from no fewer than nine times in the “Perception” and “Identification” chapters of *The Structures of the Film Experience*. Meunier states quite unambiguously just before the start of Chapter 2 that it is Hesnard’s understanding of identification and the way he deploys it in *Psychanalyse du lien interhumain*, that he will draw on for the main part of his study in Part Two: “Here we return to the theories of Hesnard, who by rethinking the concept of identification in the framework of a psychology enriched by the gains of phenomenological thinking, has unveiled its true meaning.” (p. 48)

What are the key modifications Hesnard has made to identification in his rethinking of it? Filmic identification, Meunier explains,

came to be considered in its objective form, that is, as a psychic mechanism (a mechanism of projection and introjection) or as a function (an empathic function) destined to comprehend or explain the functioning of the objective models of the personality constructed by scientific theory. (p. 33)

This was understandable, since

[it is, after all, generally admitted that the psyche can be regarded as an object, a slice of the perceptual world, or even an externally observable]
apparatus. [...] But in adopting this point of view, which it often did, filmology exposed itself to the same reproach that, in the last few years, phenomenological thinking has addressed to the scientific attitude in general, and which has done much to weaken it. By transposing psychic phenomena to an external objectivized form, that is, by reducing them to the state of simple functions or mechanisms, their very nature was altered, and their meaning or signification was thereby lost. (p. 33)

In an extrapolation of a central insight of the pioneers of phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty), Meunier insists, against “the scientific attitude” that “[t]his meaning or signification can only be perceived if we place ourselves on the terrain from which these phenomena have been extracted – namely, lived, first person experience” (p. 33/34). The meaning of phenomena must be discovered “as they present themselves to the subject who experiences them.”

Levels of Generality in Phenomenological Description

At this point in his presentation of Hesnard’s de-objectivation of the mechanism of identification, Meunier touches on the issue of generality and particularity in phenomenological description, also considered by Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich in section 4.2 of “What Is Film Phenomenology?”, entitled “Feminist and Queer Phenomenology.” Meunier specifies that describing lived experience is not a matter, of course, of elucidating particular forms of behavior – for example, a given identification of a given subject with a given person – through the concrete modalities of their realization, but, rather, of unveiling the invariable aspect in these particular forms of behavior. In other words, we must abstract real forms of behavior and the structures that we can locate in all forms of the same kind of behavior, which themselves are their specific, concrete realizations. (p. 34)

This statement of Meunier’s appears to echo the preference Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich state for a search for invariability over particular differentiation when they take issue with queer and feminist critiques of a seemingly universal type of body experience. Such critiques of seemingly universal descriptions of (film) experience can be located on two levels, the two scholars state, either as a “problem of incompleteness” (the descriptions are wrong in their limitedness, and must be amended and complemented
“by descriptions of specifically female and/or queer experiences”), or as a “problem of generality” (the descriptions’ aspiration to universality is correct, but they are insufficiently specific, and “should be amended and complemented by more concrete descriptions”). The distinction made here between levels of critique is, to my mind, a spurious one, introduced for the purposes of refuting the anti-universalist stance(s) of queer and feminist film phenomenologists: the solution to a problem Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich claim to be two problems is actually the same (the descriptions of film experience in question “must be amended and complemented” by the “more concrete” descriptions of “female and/or queer experiences”).

Whereas Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich employ logical argument of a Husserlian kind to find fault with the critiques of universal (film) experience made of Merleau-Ponty by Vivian Sobchack and Judith Butler, Meunier affirms, in a positive recommendation more in tune with existential phenomenology, that the description of the lived experience of film should abstract directly from real forms of viewers’ behavior and seek invariable structures in those forms of behavior. (This could be effected on descriptions supplied by groups of viewers who share a gender or a race just as easily as on the experiences of a mixed audience.) Meunier is aware that there is still abstraction involved in his recommended procedure for a ‘de-objectivized’ approach to the experiential description of film, and asks whether it “slip[s] back into the impasses of the scientific attitude,” but answers his own question in the negative, since the abstraction at issue is, he says, a single rather than a double objectivation of the kind hitherto effected on analyses of filmic identification (p. 34). (It is the second stage of objectivation that situates the analysis “in an objective, externally observable model, and thus, as we said above [loses] its meaning for the subject and real nature” [p. 34]). Meunier’s conclusion to this section of The Structures of the Film Experience is: “Thus, the basis for research must not be any kind of conception of man as an object of observation, but an explanation of man as an experiential subject.” (p. 35)

In their interventions into film phenomenology, queer and feminist film scholars are also concerned with experiential subjectivity – the subjectivities of female and queer embodied subjects, rather than the aspirationally universal subjectivity of ‘man.’ The de-universalization entailed in basing research into film-viewing on specified types of viewing subject arguably maintains a focus on subjectivity, ‘the real world’ and meaning exactly where it is lost by aspiring to “generalities, invariant structures of experience [...] with an emphasis on sameness, solidarity, empathy” that Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich state to be one of the diverse motives for doing phenomenology (the alternative motive they mention is “to describe how an experience is
individual, unique, particular, singular,” which they suggest “is in the interest of a politics of recognition and emancipation”\(^{11}\). By outlining two levels of objectivation which can be effected upon the mechanism of identification (and potentially other psychic phenomena), Meunier introduces a level not allowed for by Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich’s binary distinction between generality and individuality/uniqueness, a level that corresponds neither to the “pipedream of pretended neutrality” in subjectivity described by Gaylyn Studlar, nor to a wholly unique individual subject.\(^{12}\) In other words, where Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich argue that a rejection of the sharing of experiences on the level of all viewers undermines claims for the sharing of experiences by identified sub-groups of film-viewers such as female viewers, Meunier’s framework of two levels of objectivation makes it possible to argue simultaneously for difference (actual difference in embodiment or sexuality) and sharedness within identified sub-groups of film-viewers. Arguing for sharedness “only for a more specific level of generality and not for a more general level of generality” (Ferencz-Flatz/Hanich) is, Meunier would appear to agree (with me), not particularly difficult.\(^{13}\) Moreover, sharedness is not necessarily embraced “in the interest of a politics of recognition and emancipation.” It may indeed be appropriate to consider feminist film phenomenology as “post-structuralist inflected” – putting it at the ‘individual/unique/particular/singular/different’ level of Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich’s binary model of levels of generality – since feminist theory has been significantly shaped by post-structuralist questioning and deconstruction of the understanding of the subject as unitary and ‘individual,’ and has been more diverse and complex – more attuned to racial, social, and embodied differences between women – than the suggestion that it is held together by a “politics of recognition and emancipation” allows for some considerable time.

**Identifying with First-Person Experience, an Ethics of Method**

It is not only through his framework of two levels of objectivation, which offers feminist and queer phenomenologies of film a route via which to maintain an emphasis on their embodied difference while researching (quite possibly empirically) what unites them, that Meunier’s approach to film phenomenology can act as a model for future enquiry in this field: there is an ethics to the very method he uses in *The Structures of the Film Experience* that could serve such future enquiry well. For Meunier approaches the sketch of the home-movie, documentary, and fiction-film modes of film
consciousness he undertakes in Part Two of his book *in the first person*, enacting the retention of meaning and signification he insists on in at the start of his study. To quote Meunier again:

For us, it will not be a question of objectively representing to ourselves the experience of the spectator-subject, but, of placing ourselves within this experience, of attempting to describe and reveal its meaning, and specify its fundamental structures. (p. 35)

By doing exactly this in Part Two of *The Structures of the Film Experience*, Meunier enacts what could be called an ethics of identification (“placing ourselves within this experience”), which I would argue should be adopted by future film-phenomenological enquiry.

Sandra Bartky’s essay “Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness” – an approach to a particular type of consciousness that parallels Meunier’s enquiry into film consciousness in *The Structures of the Film Experience* – offers some useful considerations for the path I am attempting to steer here. Bartky notes early in the essay that “To be a feminist, one has first to become one,” which often “involves the experience of a profound personal transformation, a [‘complex and multi-faceted’] experience which goes far beyond that sphere of human activity we regard ordinarily as ‘political’.”

This transformation entails altered behavior, and

These changes in behavior go hand in hand with changes in consciousness: to become a feminist is to develop a radically altered consciousness of oneself, of others and of what for lack of a better term, I shall call ‘social reality.’ [...] What is a fully developed feminist consciousness like? In this paper, I would like to examine not the full global experience of liberation, involving as it does new ways of being as well as new ways of perceiving but, more narrowly, those distinctive ways of perceiving which characterize feminist consciousness. What follows will be a highly tentative attempt at a morphology of feminist consciousness.

The morphology Bartky goes on to attempt suggests that feminist consciousness is ‘anguished’ in a way politicized consciousnesses typically are: it manifests the “inner uncertainty and confusion which characterizes human subjectivity in periods of social change.” Bartky rebukes Marxist scholarship for not paying sufficient attention “to the ways in which the social and economic tensions they study are played out in the lives of concrete individuals,” confirming (since she also states this in different
terms elsewhere in the essay) that this is her motivation for incorporating phenomenological description into Marxist analysis – in other words, for adding feminist consciousness to a body of scholarship that has only ever considered one mode of consciousness – class consciousness – at all seriously.17 How, though, is the temporality of feminist consciousness to be understood? Bartky elucidates as follows:

This consciousness [...] emerges only when there exists a genuine possibility for the partial or total liberation of women. This possibility is more than a mere accidental accompaniment of feminist consciousness. Feminist consciousness is the apprehension of that possibility. The very meaning of what the feminist apprehends is illuminated by the light of what ought to be. The given situation is first understood in terms of a state of affairs not yet actual and in this sense a possibility, a state of affairs in which what is not given would be negated and radically transformed.18

This project of negation and transformation constitutes transcendence as Sartre describes it in Being and Nothingness (L'être et le néant), but understanding “what we are and where we are in the light of what we are not yet” is a perspective Bartky considers insufficiently rooted in the actual, present world for feminism, a point that leads her to admit that there will be instances in which the possibilities apprehended by feminist consciousness are not realizable, because of unfavorable material conditions.19 Feminist consciousness, she implies with this observation, is not a property that can be acquired; it is a way of conceiving of the world that may come and go. The phenomenology of feminist consciousness Bartky attempts (and I am suggesting), which might serve feminist phenomenological explorations of film experience, is, it must be emphasized, phenomenological and not ontological: ontological questioning and theorizing are not appropriate approaches to the phenomenon at issue. And just as importantly, it is a politicized and political form of consciousness – feminist consciousness – and not the essentialistically defined gendered entity female consciousness that Bartky considers it possible and worthwhile to describe and approach in her essay. To enter into speculation about distinct female and male consciousness(es) would be to re-rehearse debates about the possible usefulness of essentialist theorizing for feminism that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and therefore philosophically, as well as politically, retrograde.

Further aspects of feminist consciousness explored by Bartky in “Towards a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness” – that it is consciousness of victimization, and that it entails apprehensiveness, suspicion, or ‘wariness’
– are not in my view especially relevant to the pertinence the concept could prove to have for the specificity of women’s experiences of viewing film. Of the two quasi-definitions of the concept Bartky offers in her concluding paragraphs – that it “can be understood as the negating and transcending awareness of one’s own relationship to a society heavy with its own contradictions,” and that it is “the consciousness of a being radically alienated from her world and often divided against herself, a being who sees herself as victim and whose victimization determines her being in-the-world as resistance, wariness and suspicion,” the first seems a better basis on which to move forward to the description of women’s experiences of viewing films. Probably even more noteworthy for the possible rapprochement of Bartky’s work with feminist phenomenological film theory, however, because it confirms the proximity of her discussion to existential phenomenology, is her statement “To develop feminist consciousness is to live a part of one’s life in the sort of ambiguous ethical situation which existentialist writers have been most adept at describing.” This observation coincides with my discussion, toward the end of the first chapter of The Body and the Screen, of female subjectivity as ethical in its ambiguity (for Beauvoir) or two-ness (for Luce Irigaray), a coincidence to which I draw attention simply in order to emphasize that the question of method, with which Meunier is concerned in The Structures of the Film Experience (and which may also be seen at work in Bartky’s first-person approach in “Towards a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness”), is itself an ethical question. In The Structures of the Film Experience, Meunier does not comment directly as he proceeds on the first-person form he adopts when working through the viewing experiences that constitute the three attitudes of imaginary filmic consciousness (toward the film-souvenir, the documentary, and the fiction film), but he anticipates the value of this method in his introductory discussion of levels of objectivation, and states there: “The present study constitutes an attempt in this direction.” (p. 35) The method he employs in Part Two of his book is one that values first-person subjective experience practically and ethically, as much as it does philosophically.

To conclude by recapitulating my argument in this essay, it has been that the intersection and confluence of contemporary queer and feminist film phenomenologies with historical film phenomenology will benefit from employing the ‘ethics of method’ I claim emerges in Meunier’s The Structures of the Film Experience, and has previously been practiced by feminist phenomenologists such as Sandra Bartky. This ethics arises from Meunier’s adoption of the phenomenological approach to identification, set out by Angelo Hesnard in Psychanalyse du lien interhumain, which Meunier implicitly observes in his
explanation of the importance of de-objectivizing the concept of identification in the introduction to The Structures of the Film Experience and then practices in the highly original sketch of the home-film, documentary, and fiction-film modes of consciousness he undertakes in Part Two of his book.

Notes

7. The concept of spectatorship has continued to be used since that era, in a manner that ill befits the philosophically more diverse range of approaches to film-viewing to which it has given way.
10. It is pertinent to note here that Husserlian phenomenology has had far less influence and impact on contemporary film phenomenologies than Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and lived embodiment: Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich observe of Allan Casebier’s 1991 Husserlian study *Phenomenology and Film* that “Casebier’s book failed not only to fundamentally revolutionize film theory, but also to have a noteworthy impact on it.” Ibid., p. 39.
11. Ibid., p. 50 n129.
12. Quoted in ibid., p. 48.
13. Ferencz-Flatz/Hanich, “What Is Film Phenomenology?”, p. 50. Furthermore, Ferencz-Flatz/Hanich point out that “[p]henomenology was rediscovered as a helpful tool for more straightforward social or political goals. Among feminist and queer film phenomenologists we nowadays find attempts to “politicize” phenomenology, to make it less disengaged from activist thinking, and to combine film phenomenology with questions of gender and sex and, more generally, embodied difference.” Ferencz-Flatz/Hanich, “What Is Film Phenomenology?”, p. 48.
15. Ibid., p. 12.
19. Ibid., p. 15.
20. Ibid. p. 18.
21. Ibid. p. 21
22. Ibid. p. 20.

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