

The Structures of the Film Experience: Jean-Pierre Meunier, Film-Phenomenology and Contemporary Film Studies

International Symposium organized by the Department of Theater, Film and Media Studies of Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main (Prof. Vinzenz Hediger) and the Department of Arts, Culture and Media at the University of Groningen (Prof. Julian Hanich) in cooperation with the Permanent Seminar on Histories of Film Theories and the Städelschule — Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, 23-25 November 2017.

Jean-Pierre Meunier's *Les Structures de l'expérience filmique. L'identification filmique* (1969)¹ is a largely forgotten book and yet, thanks to Vivian Sobchack and Dudley Andrew, a key text within the history of film studies. In it, the Belgian psychologist intertwines phenomenological reflections with ideas from the French *filmologie* movement, and systematically explores various viewer identification strategies with the material shown in the film. Inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* (1940), Meunier defines three modes of spectatorship: the fiction attitude; the documentary attitude; and the home movie attitude. Meunier, it could be argued, was among the first to develop an interest in what has only recently become a thriving subfield of film studies, namely the exploration of useful films and home movies.²

On the occasion of the English translation of Meunier's book, a symposium in Frankfurt united film, media and culture historians, philosophers and theorists from different continents to discuss — in the presence of the author — the importance of this publication to current film studies. In the opening interview, Meunier described his astonishment at the renewed interest in his work and the papers' focus on the home movie attitude. He stated that in 1969 — with films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless (À bout de souffle)*, 1960), Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960) in mind — his primary research interest was in viewer identification with protagonists in feature films, more than in the home movie attitude.

Meunier's statement served as a preview to several of the talks at the symposium, but it also provided a historical perspective on contemporary interest in his book. The symposium's speakers underlined two further significant aspects of the volume. Several participants discussed at length the home movie attitude — the viewer's approach to 'useful films' or home movies. Others put Meunier's

¹ Jean-Pierre Meunier, *Les Structures de l'expérience filmique. L'identification filmique* (Louvain: Librairie Universitaire, 1969). The English translation will be published in a volume with essays based on the conference contributions, edited by Daniel Fairfax and Julian Hanich, in the "Film Theory in Media History" book series, published by Amsterdam University Press.

² In the original publication Meunier uses the term *film souvenir*.

book in an historical context, discussed its contribution to film philosophy in general and its relevance to phenomenological approaches to film in particular.

Following the interview with Meunier, Vivian Sobchack presented a paper that related the home movie attitude to the uncanny of the selfie. Therein she proposed a tripartite division of the uncanny: a) the 'axiological uncanny', describing the viewer's initial judgment of their own appearance and their questions of self-value: this arises from the difference between the image one holds of oneself and the externalized perception of oneself in a selfie image; b) the 'epistemological uncanny', which comes into play alongside the desire to recognize oneself within the visual image after the initial sense of estrangement has subsided; and c) the existential question 'What am I?', which stands at the centre of the 'ontological uncanny'.

From today's perspective, it is crucial to compare phenomenology's epistemological interest in perception with the specific historical contexts in which the discussion has taken place. Noting that in *Les Structures de l'expérience filmique* Meunier describes the experience of one's own body as well as the experiences and perceptions of other bodies, without considering specific differences between them or the specific historical situations, contemporary scholars are — to a certain extent — obliged to thematize this lacuna. Jenny Chamarette's talk addressed this aspect, focusing on questions of ethnic and gender differences in view of inter-subjectivity and corporality during the perception of Céline Sciamma's film *Bande des filles* (2014). The specifically female subject of perception was the topic of Kate Ince's paper 'Phenomenology and the Female Viewing Subject'. Her use of the term 'feminist consciousness' led to a heated debate prompted by the lack of terminological delineation, by the speaker herself and by other participants at the symposium.

The historical importance and positioning of Meunier's book within film studies in general and film theory in particular was discussed by Robert Sinnerbrink in his presentation 'The Missing Link: Meunier on Imagination, Empathy, and Emotional Engagement' and by Daniel Fairfax in 'A Missing Link in Film Theory? Meunier between Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis'. While Sinnerbrink focused on the importance that Meunier ascribed to imagination in the comprehension of audiovisual images, Fairfax presented an outline of *The Structures of Film Experience* within the 'family tree' of film theory. According to Fairfax's thesis, Meunier's book represents a missing link, which reconciles two usually opposing positions: a phenomenological film theory on the one hand, and psychoanalytical-based film theory on the other.

Marie-Aude Baronian highlighted the relevance and productivity of Meunier's thinking in view of contemporary filmmaking. Her focus lay on the depiction of home movies in the works of the Canadian-Armenian filmmaker and artist Atom Egoyan, such as *Family Viewing* (1987) and *A Portrait of Arshile* (1995), in order to emphasize cinema's memory function through the use of *film souvenirs*. She concluded that the *film souvenir* within cinema underlines its twofold desire: to remember, and to forget itself. Vinzenz Hediger, on the

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other hand, did not discuss cinema *per se* but focused on the specific experience of ephemeral and authorless orphan films: films that are neither protected by copyright laws nor belong to a particular person or institution. The theoretical framework in Hediger's conception of a phenomenology of ephemeral films was based on Meunier's three modes of spectatorship. The linking of different yet simultaneously occurring attitudes, during the perception of ephemeral films functioned as a starting point for a further development of Meunier's *tripartite*. The speaker specifically reflected upon his own perception of these films as a film scholar during a screening at the German Mining Museum in Bochum. Under the heading 'With Meunier beyond Meunier' he focused on several possible intersections between the modes of spectatorship and on the difficulty of attributing a single attitude to the viewer. It appears that, for the theorization of the intersections between these attitudes, the chosen object of study — the ephemeral film — is extremely productive since it can neither be clearly defined as a documentary film nor as a *film souvenir*.

The breadth and diversity of the further subjects discussed was striking. Papers were presented on video-selfies (Christian Ferencz-Flatz); 'the person-in-general' and the theory of reference (Guido Kirsten); the film experience in the age of convergence (Florian Sprenger); the intimate relationship between a scholar and a book (Dudley Andrew); and phenomenological approaches to the photographic image from the perspective of Buddhist philosophers (Victor Fan).

The discussion following Julian Hanich's closing talk, 'A Brief Phenomenology of Daydreaming in the Cinema', became animated when Jenny Chamarette asked the speaker what was at stake in his elaborations.³ The question 'What is at stake?' can also be asked of the symposium as a whole. What has contemporary film theory to gain from a re-reading of a somewhat neglected, 50-year old text written by a Belgian psychologist? As the talks from different research fields and the following discussions demonstrated, the critical and reflective analysis of historical key texts such as Meunier's not only is productive and thought-provoking, but it is also indispensable to the methodological self-understanding and development of a young academic discipline such as film studies.

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³ Jenny Chamarette was possibly asking how the speaker would define the difference between daydreaming in everyday life and daydreaming in the specific context of the cinema.