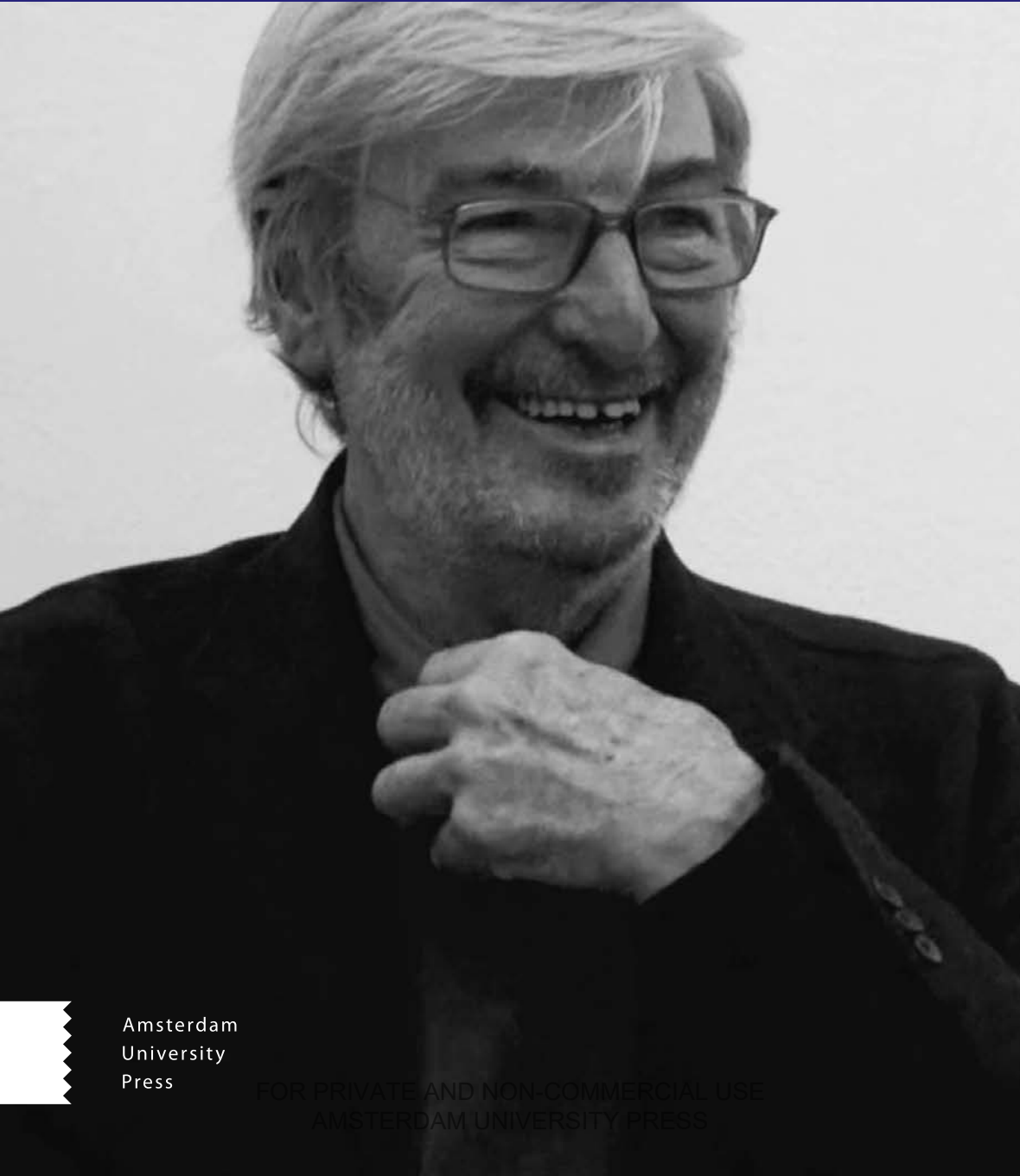




THE STRUCTURES OF THE FILM EXPERIENCE
BY JEAN-PIERRE MEUNIER

HISTORICAL ASSESSMENTS AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPANSIONS

EDITED BY JULIAN HANICH AND DANIEL FAIRFAX



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Film Theory in Media History

Film Theory in Media History explores the epistemological and theoretical foundations of the study of film through texts by classical authors as well as anthologies and monographs on key issues and developments in film theory. Adopting a historical perspective, but with a firm eye to the further development of the field, the series provides a platform for ground-breaking new research into film theory and media history and features high-profile editorial projects that offer resources for teaching and scholarship. Combining the book form with open access online publishing the series reaches the broadest possible audience of scholars, students, and other readers with a passion for film and theory.

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Julian Hanich and Daniel Fairfax*

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Introduction

Julian Hanich/Daniel Fairfax

Fifty years ago, a young Belgian psychologist wrote a short book for a small publisher in the Belgian town of Leuven, a book that had little resonance in the French-speaking world and was almost completely overlooked elsewhere. The psychologist, 27 years old at the time, was Jean-Pierre Meunier, and his study bore the title *Les Structures de l'expérience filmique: L'identification filmique*.¹ Meunier, born in 1941 in Namur (Wallonia), had studied psychology at the Catholic University in Leuven from 1960 to 1964, and subsequently became a *chercheur* at the *Centre des techniques de diffusion* under the auspices of Victor Bachy, one of the first professors to teach film courses at a Belgian university. Later promoted to research assistant, Meunier joined an interdisciplinary team consisting of philosophers, psychologists, specialists in law, and sociologists to study the effects of media. It was at that time that he developed a phenomenological approach to the study of film and set out to write *The Structures of the Film Experience*.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to overlook that the year 1969, when the book appeared in a simple green and white cover, was hardly fertile terrain for a rigorous phenomenological study – one that was heavily influenced by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Husserl, but also by psychological research on perception (Albert Michotte van den Berck, Henri Wallon) and psychoanalytic conceptions of identification (Angelo Hesnard). Needless to say, on intellectual highways crowded by powerfully motored semiotic, psychoanalytic, and Marxist trucks that were headed in a decidedly political direction, Meunier's little vehicle did not gain much headway. Trying to retain the value of describing the subjective experience of viewers from the first person, it seemed outdated theoretically and outmoded politically.

And yet, some people *did* read the book and were impressed by it. Dudley Andrew, who discovered the book in a Parisian bookshop, was one of its first champions. In his influential article “The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Theory” from 1978, Andrew was struck by how Meunier “describe[s], and account[s] for the peculiar fascination and momentum belonging to various types of film, from home movies through narrative features.”² In 1983, Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet included Meunier in a list of recommended readings at the end of a chapter on the spectator in their *L'Esthétique du film*.³ Later, in *Du Visage au cinéma* (1992), Aumont described Meunier's book as an “authentically



Fig. 1: Jean-Pierre Meunier's private copy of his book.

Sartrean attempt” to theorize the filmic spectator, an attempt that was so far removed in time for him, however, that it already seemed dated at the time of its appearance.⁴ At the end of the 1990s, Vivian Sobchack sat down with an English-French dictionary and slowly worked her way through the book to fully grasp Meunier’s important contribution to understanding the viewer’s relation not only to the fiction film, but also to the documentary film and the home movie (or *film-souvenir*, as the more specific term in French would have it). In her article “Towards a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience” (1999), Sobchack describes *The Structures of the Film Experience* as “an undeservedly neglected book” that “offers the premises and potential for an enriched understanding of how dynamic and fluid our engagement with the cinema really is.”⁵ Meunier’s text also found resonances in other

ways: for instance, it left a profound impression on the young Marie-Aude Baronian, who, as she recalls in her contribution to this volume, found the book in her father's private collection on cinema and philosophy, an encounter that resulted in a moment of epiphany for the future scholar.

Meunier's attention to home movies, highly unusual as it was for its time, is a good example of one of the most astonishing facets of his book: in some respects, *The Structures of the Film Experience* predates later research by decades. For instance, as Robert Sinnerbrink shows, Meunier came up with very similar categories of character identification to those devised by Murray Smith more than 25 years later in his influential book *Engaging Characters* (1995).⁶ Long before Hans Jürgen Wulff rejected the notion that viewers empathize with single characters and instead suggested the idea of an "empathic field,"⁷ Meunier had described characters in the cinema as "relational nodal points" or "characters-for-other-characters": "They define themselves with respect to other characters and the objective elements (or rather 'objectifiable' elements), which characterize them, only have meaning in the social context specific to the film" (p. 137). Moreover, much like Noël Carroll many years after him, Meunier rejects overblown ideas of a total fusion with characters in identification (even while insisting on a certain loss of the self):

I must act 'as if' I were in the place of the characters, 'as if' I possessed their bodies and possibilities. And yet, this 'as if,' imposed by the insurmountable distance between that behavior which remains inexorably before my own self, remains implicit for consciousness, and renders the realization of the relationship impossible. This is because 'acting' at being like another person implies that, at the same time, I deny that I simply am this other person (p. 134).⁸

Similarly, his brief but incisive remarks on film stars, although following in the footsteps of Edgar Morin's *Les stars* (*The Stars*, 1957), a book Meunier knew, predate Richard Dyer's more extensive work on that topic from the late 1970s and 1980s.⁹ This alone would justify devoting closer attention to Meunier's study.

Here, we publish *The Structures of the Film Experience* for the first time in English translation, and complement the text with a collection of essays that historically locate it, critically discuss its merits, and extend it into territory far beyond its original habitat. This is more than a philological favor to those interested in the history of film theory (particularly in film phenomenology, but also in cognitivism, filmology, and psychoanalytic film

theory). For various reasons, Meunier's book remains a fascinating read, a quality that has to do with its assured tone and reasoned argumentation, an argumentation refuting contemporaneous positions as convincingly as it smoothly incorporates scholarly findings. While the book, except for a few references to filmologists like Michotte van den Berck, Jean-Jacques Rinieri, or François Ricci, contains hardly any footnotes referencing the film theory of its time, the young author shows a profound familiarity with the phenomenological literature of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.

Meunier's book, and this is not the least of its qualities, demonstrates film phenomenology from its most intriguing and convincing side. The work does not limit itself to a subjectivist account of an idiosyncratic viewer response, but provides a description of the recurring structures of the film-viewing experience. As Meunier unmistakably defines his own phenomenological description of identification: "It 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" (p. 34, emphasis added). Implicitly distancing himself from the subjectivism of what today often goes by the name of 'film phenomenology,' Meunier sets out to describe from a *generalized* first-person perspective the invariable differences between three modes of spectatorial engagement: the home-movie attitude, the documentary attitude, and the fiction attitude. As the contributions to this volume show, these distinctions are as stimulating for further phenomenological explorations as they are in need of amendment and further differentiation.

If not every detail of the book survives equally well after 50 years, this was entirely expected, even hoped for by the author. At the end of his introduction, Meunier writes modestly but with an unabashed belief in the progress of scholarly insight:

Inevitably, the views expressed here will be criticized, corrected and even refuted with scientific progress in the field. Unavoidably, too, some (possibly important) aspects of the problems occupying us will escape us or will not be given the space they deserve. But what we do hope will come out of this work is that, beyond its imperfections, it shows some contours of the truth, some new insights, some interesting perspectives and that, above all, it provides a source of inspiration for new hypotheses conducive to advancing the cause of filmology" (p. 36/37).¹⁰

Notes

1. Jean-Pierre Meunier, *Les Structures de l'expérience filmique: L'identification filmique* (Louvain: Vander, 1969).
2. Dudley Andrew, "The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Theory," *Wide Angle* 2:2 (1978), p. 47.
3. Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet, *L'Esthétique du film* (Paris: Nathan, 1983), p. 203.
4. Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1992), p. 61.
5. Vivian Sobchack, "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," in Jaine M. Gaines/Michael Renov (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 241-254, here p. 242.
6. Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).
7. Hans J. Wulff, "Empathie als Dimension des Filmverstehens: Ein Thesenpapier," *Montage/AV* 12:1 (2003), pp. 136-161.
8. See, for instance, Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 88-96.
9. Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979) and *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
10. The editors would like to thank Jeroen Sondervan and Maryse Elliott, the former and current commissioning editors of Amsterdam University Press, for their strong interest in this project. Thanks also to the editors of the Amsterdam University Press series "Film Theory in Media History" – Vinzenz Hediger, Weihong Bao, and Trond Lundemo – for their endorsement and helpful comments. Another important person was Nina Yakimova from the University of Groningen, who diligently supported the editing process. Not least, we wish to thank Jean-Pierre Meunier himself for his dedication to this volume. Not only did he reserve generous time during two conversation sessions for the interview that follows this introduction, but he also took a close look at the translation and helped improve it with his comments.