"Every Theory Needs a Reference to Lived Experience": An Interview with Jean-Pierre Meunier

Julian Hanich/Daniel Fairfax

Your book came out in 1969 when you were still a very young scholar. Can you tell us a bit about the years leading up to your writing of The Structures of the Film Experience?[1]

Jean-Pierre Meunier: From 1960 to 1964, I did a degree in psychology at the Catholic University of Leuven/Louvain. At that time, the teaching of psychology was very diverse. It naturally included many courses of so-called scientific psychology, like experimental psychology and psychometrics. But, on the other hand, often in opposition to the pure and hard experimentalist tendency, many teachings gave a relatively important place to psychoanalysis and phenomenology. These currents of thought that emphasized the lived experience and existential problems interested many students. The "spirit of the time," to use an expression that served as the title of a beautiful book by Edgar Morin, was still strongly marked by existentialism and very little by Marxism.[2] In this context, individual existence gains more attention than the systems and structures of which it is a part. Hence, the interest in the relations with others and the relation with oneself, and also the interest of many – and, in any case, me – in the notion of identification. I remember our interest in Freud's concept of narcissism, and toward the end of my studies in 1964, in a text by Jacques Lacan, still little known at the time, about the mirror stage.

This is something today's psychology students might be very astonished to hear: that in your psychology lectures and seminars you were reading Freud, Lacan, and phenomenology.

JPM: Belgians are very eclectic. During my studies, there were courses on experimental psychology, but also courses that presented Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. And, at this time, they also began to give some attention to Lacan. There is a good Belgian author, Alphonse de Waelhens,

Fig. 2: Meunier during the first part of the interview on 23 November 2017 in Frankfurt am Main.

who wrote an interesting book, *La philosophie et les expériences naturelles*, in which he merged phenomenology and the theory of Lacan.[3]

After your studies and before writing The Structures of the Film Experience, *you worked on a study of a single film:* La Vie conjugale (Anatomy of a Marriage*, 1964*) *by André Cayatte.*[4]

JPM: Yes, this was an empirical research project about the reception of the film, and I was employed as assistant to Professor Victor Bachy from the institute of political and social sciences in my university, who had set up a media research center, the *Centre des techniques de diffusion*. Its intention was to bring together researchers from different backgrounds to develop an interdisciplinary approach to media. I arrived in 1964, at the right moment, to occupy one of the positions he reserved to psychologists to finish empirical research dealing with the reception of Cayatte's film. It would be too long to talk about this study in detail, but suffice it to say that it allowed me to point out in the responses of the film's spectators obvious traces of identification with the characters, because the responses given by men and women were noticeably different. And it also helped me to convince Professor Bachy of the interest of the notion of identification.

Where did the importance of phenomenology in your work come from?

JPM: What I learned from phenomenology during my studies convinced me that the phenomenological approach to the lived experience of the spectator constituted the best approach to the film experience. When I was a student, I read Sartre's *The Imaginary*, and when I was employed by the *Centre des techniques de diffusion*, Professor Victor Bachy invited me to work on my ideas in one of his courses on film. It is within the framework of this course that I developed a phenomenological approach to the cinematic imaginary: I remembered the importance of the distinctions Sartre made between different ways of paying attention to reality, as existent or non-existent. In fact, I had three frames of reference to orient my reflection. First: the description of image consciousness proposed by Sartre in *The Imaginary*, whose different forms of image consciousness seemed to me to correspond to the main types of cinematic representation: home movies (*films-souvenir*), documentary films, fiction films. Second: the concept of identification proposed by psychoanalyst Angelo Hesnard, who wrote on the phenomenological conception of intersubjectivity. Third: a number of articles from the *Revue internationale de filmologie*, which I had just discovered in the faculty library – mainly articles by psychologists like Henri Wallon and Albert Michotte van den Berck as well as Gilbert Cohen-Séat.

That's the beauty of serendipity: you go to the library, you browse, and you find something you have never looked for. How did you come across Angelo Hesnard, a psychoanalyst who is lesser known today?

JPM: Also by accident, when I was walking through the library. I knew that Hesnard tried to compose a phenomenology focusing on human relations, intersubjectivity, and psychoanalysis.

Did you also read the texts of André Bazin back then?

JPM: No. I was mostly unfamiliar with Bazin. I only knew a little of his work.

But filmology was important for your work?

JPM: Yes, I was really inspired by Cohen-Séat, Morin, Michotte van den Berck, and some of Jean Mitry's writings. Certainly by Michotte and Cohen-Séat, because they highlighted the role of mimesis in spectatorial participation: there is a correspondence between the body of the character and the mimetic

body of the spectator. For Cohen-Séat, this implies that the spectator no longer truly has awareness of himself. As for Michotte van den Berck, he said that, at bottom, the spectator no longer has his own sensations – he forgets them. For the spectator, the character has become his external aspect. So there are two complementary aspects: the spectator forgets himself, and, for him, the character has become akin to his external aspect. This is what impressed me the most, because here we find the entire problem of filmic identification, as I tried to explain in *The Structures of the Film Experience* and, *a fortiori*, in my second book *Essai sur l'image et la communication.* In *The Structures of the Film Experience*, the home-movie attitude was not really important for me. It was just a way to find my bearings: to show that, in the fiction attitude, protention and retention are so strong that the spectator effectively forgets himself, whereas in documentaries and home movies there is still some relationship with the real.

You mentioned the three main influences of your work that structured The Structures of the Film Experience. *You also have the triple structure in your distinction between fiction attitude, documentary attitude, and home-movie attitude. Is there an importance of the number three for you?*

JPM: For me, at the time, the triptych fiction attitude/documentary attitude/home-movie attitude was especially interesting for highlighting the experience of the viewer of fiction. My interest was in the fiction-film, and only in the fiction-film. But Sartre's distinctions allowed me to show that, in the home movie, we are looking for people *in general*, for the style of the person, but we still stay within reality. When you look at a photograph of somebody you know, you are situated in a certain time and place; when you follow a fiction film, you are not in the real world. It seems to me that it is the home-movie attitude that has come to the fore now. Perhaps it is due to technological change, which has allowed for an unprecedented multiplication of image-memories and representations of oneself.

What were the fiction films that you were predominantly interested in at the time?

JPM: Fellini, Godard, Truffaut, of course. The *nouvelle vague*. But also comedies like Georges Lautner's *Les Tontons-flingueurs* (*Monsieur Gangster*, 1963). I went to the cinema very often and I saw a lot of movies at that time. The period was rich in outstanding films: *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960) by

Godard, *L'Avventura* (1960) by Antonioni, *La Dolce Vita* (1960) by Fellini – all films which testify to the phenomena of empathy and identification that the cinema arouses, and that interested me in *The Structures of the Film Experience.*

What was the cinema scene in Louvain like?

JPM: Louvain is a city with a big university. At the time, there were cinemas, whose programs were like in other big cities, but there were also *ciné-clubs* for the students, with a special choice of experimental films, etc.

Did you also frequent the famous Cinémathèque belge in Brussels?

JPM: At this time, never. I was a student in psychology, not cinema. I simply had the chance to be employed by a communications department as a psychologist.

In the late 1960s, you then wrote The Structures of the Film Experience *as a research assistant for Victor Bachy.*

JPM: Yes. The book came out as part of a new collection launched by Professor Bachy to publicize the work of our research center. It was put out by a modest Louvain publisher called Vander. But the collection was too discreet to be known beyond a very narrow cycle of researchers, especially because, since 1969, attention had already shifted significantly towards structuralism in its various forms. In this new intellectual context, the image in general became a sign and the cinema became a special kind of language. Suspected of subjectivism and even of idealism, phenomenology as a method disappeared, to give way to the formalism of semiology. I believe that without the attention that Vivian Sobchack and a few others gave to *The Structures of Film Experience*, the book would likely have fallen into oblivion. It seems that it is now enjoying a new life fifty years after its release.

What was your first reaction when you heard that your book was coming out in English translation?

JPM: I was indeed very surprised, because for me it was a text that had been buried by several layers of structuralism, pragmatism, etc. It was something that I did not think would have been interesting to return to. But

on the other hand, I feel like there is a broader groundswell of interest in the phenomenological approach. This aspect did not surprise me so much. I was quite happy, in the end, to see this newfound interest in an old work that had been rarely cited in the French academic literature.

Did you know Vivian Sobchack's essay "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience" from 1999, in which she introduces the ideas of The Structures of the Film Experience *to non-French speakers?*

JPM: Not at all.

There was no dialogue between you and Sobchack?

JPM: None whatsoever. It was only later that I encountered her work, in the special issue of *Studia Phaenomenologica* on "Film and Phenomenology" that Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich published, for which we both wrote an article.[5] Before that, I didn't know her at all.

Were you aware of other resonances your text had in the English-speaking world?

JPM: No. It's astonishing, but perhaps it was because this all took place in film theory, and I have mostly abandoned this terrain. For me, it turned into a marginal area. I became a professor of general semiology and the general theory of communication, so problems relating to the image were no longer specific for me. I understood them in a more general framework, relating to audio-scripto-visual communication. So I was focused on the image only within complex messages, and I was no longer occupied with the specific literature on the cinema.

Before you became a professor in general semiology, you had to write a dissertation. It was entitled Image et perception: essai de description phénoménologique de l'expérience filmique *and was later published as your second book under a different title: the still untranslated* Essai sur l'image et la communication.[6]

JPM: Indeed. I wrote it in the early 1970s, and in the 1970s nobody in my department was interested in phenomenology anymore. It was the time for semiology, for narratology, for Lacan and Althusser. I wrote my thesis because I was obliged to have a thesis to continue my career at the university, and of

Fig. 3: Meunier in 1972 during a public lecture that was part of the requirements to acquire the doctoral degree in his faculty.

course I continued with what I knew: phenomenology. I was also interested in semiology, but it was easier for me to go on with what I knew. In *The Structures of the Film Experience*, I had taken Sartre as the framework, but the second book was based on Merleau-Ponty: namely, his books *Structure of Behavior* (*La Structure du comportement*) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (*La Phénoménologie de la perception*), two works which I studied deeply at that time. It seemed to me that what Merleau-Ponty said about perception, which is inspired by Husserl, what is called the perspectivism of perception, was a very interesting way to comprehend the fiction-attitude. In my book, I compared the real and the unreal.

The thesis was finished in 1972, but the book only came out in 1980. Why did it take so long?

JPM: There were no more publishers ready to publish a book of phenomenology at that time. It was very difficult. In France, it was not possible, nor in Belgium. I myself was rather uncertain about the value of phenomenology at that time. So I delayed the publication for a few years, until the day that my thesis supervisor told me that I must publish my thesis. So I found a very little publisher in Louvain, whose name was Cabay, which has since become a big publisher (but not thanks to me…).

Even more than The Structures of the Film Experience, *the second book was overshadowed by new intellectual currents.*

JPM: Yes, indeed. Let me briefly go through the history of this: interest in phenomenology had completely died out as a result of the waves of structuralism, Marxism, materialism, which served to rediscover the materiality of language. For these studies (semiology, narratology, and other types of formalism), there was nothing but codes. Nonetheless, there was also the famous special issue of *Communications* on psychoanalysis and cinema, with articles by Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, and others, who were inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis.[7] Here, you can indeed find an interest for the lived experience. They weren't doing phenomenology in a Husserlian, Sartrean, or Merleau-Pontian vein, but they did pay heed to lived experience. And when, for example, Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier* described the film-viewer as an all-perceiving subject, it goes without saying that I saw the relationship with what I had written in *Essai sur l'image et la communication*. We were both concerned with perspectivism.

As I said, in *The Structures of the Film Experience*, my point of departure was Sartre and his different imaginary attitudes. *Essai sur l'image et la communication* was based more on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and on their description of the perspectivism that characterizes perception. This notion, fundamental for phenomenology, takes account of the fact that, in our experience of the real, what we perceive is mediated by its perspectival aspect, and that, therefore, it always exceeds our vision. This is true both for the perception of objects and for the perception of other people. Perceiving a cube (to take the classical example) involves perceiving a volume through a profile that can only show us three sides – the other sides are merely anticipated. As Merleau-Ponty put it: "The 'things' in naïve experience are evident as perspectival beings: it is essential to them, both to offer themselves without interposed milieu and to reveal themselves only gradually and never completely [...]; I grasp in a perspectival appearance, which I know is only one of its possible aspects, the thing itself which transcends it."[8] It is the same for other people. I can only perceive certain forms of behavior, but understanding them is akin to slipping into a life grasped as a totality (as a general manner of being or as a style of behavior) since the perceived gestures become meaningful for us from a mass of other possible gestures – possible but not immediately accessible, and which thus remain hypothetical. As with objects, the other person always transcends our vision.

On this basis, I tried to show that unreal objects and people do not have this transcendental character. They do appear to us in perspective, as in

reality, but we know that the perceived profiles (the perceived aspects of objects, or the behavior of the character) only have an imaginary existence, that they do not really imply other possible profiles, and that the totalities that we aim for through them are entirely constituted by us, by our gaze. By slipping into the gestures of a fictional character, we bestow them with a life and an imaginary interiority which is wholly the result of our projections.

Here you show some similarities to other film theorists from this period.

JPM: Yes, indeed. From this derive some of the major characteristics of the filmic experience described by film theorists: the sentiment of being an "all-perceiving subject" (to adopt Metz's expression), as well as the forgetting of the self (the "absence of reflexive duplication" noted by Cohen-Séat) and identification such as described by Michotte (in the cinema, the character "becomes, so to speak the external aspect of the person of the spectator"). In the end, it is the extent to which what is perceived no longer has any real (transcendental) alterity that we lose a sense of difference and of our own identity. I can't delve any further, here, into the details of this explanation, nor into the nuances that arise from it. I will simply add that, as opposed to Metz, who was inspired by Lacan, I do not conceive of the cinema as an ideological apparatus, but as a *dispositif* that allows for many different forms of identification, empathy, comprehension, projection, etc. In Metz, the idea of the all-perceiving subject is based on an identification with the camera; I based it on the perceptive characteristics of the image. So Metz and I had similar ideas about an all-perceiving subject. But in contrast to Metz I didn't conceive of the cinema as an ideological apparatus. Metz used this idea to condemn the cinema. For Baudry, too, and especially for him, the cinema is an ideological apparatus, as he wrote in his famous 1970 article for *Cinéthique*.[9]

Did you have any contact with Roger Odin, who later developed a semio-pragmatic approach in which, in a somewhat similar way to your triptych, he distinguishes modes of reading a fiction film, a documentary film, and a home movie?

JPM: I have never met Odin. I noted with interest that he made distinctions similar to those that I proposed (between the fiction film, the documentary, and the 'family film'), but his semio-pragmatic approach (founded on the notions of the institution and the corresponding reading) is noticeably different from mine, which is more psychological in nature.

You had done this already ten to fifteen years earlier.

JPM: In a way, yes. But I'm not saying he got it from me! He took a different path.

After you became a professor of general semiology, you gradually lost interest in phenomenology and film?

JPM: When I was writing *Essai sur l'image et la communication*, I was still using phenomenology, and we could still speak in those terms, because structuralism was not yet dominant. Then people lost interest entirely, and took to speaking of structures, codes, etc. And I followed this movement. Also, film courses in the strict sense practically disappeared from my department after Professor Bachy left. I had a filmology course that was canceled, because the department oriented itself more towards journalism and public relations. I was in this department and I became more interested in semiology, pragmatics, and educative messages. At bottom, I followed two orientations: the general theory of communication, and more specifically, educational communication, that is, documentary, pedagogical communication, museology, and the like. So the cinema disappeared from my field of interests. But I have always kept a phenomenological thread, because in my courses on semio-pragmatics, I have taught the pragmatics of Austin, Searle, Grice, and others, but also certain works relating to messages combining images, writing, speech, etc.

It's interesting that you mention that phenomenology remained important for you. Already in The Structures of the Film Experience*, you voiced a strong critique of positivism in filmology, from a phenomenological point of view. You argued that there are things that quantification cannot take account of – such as subjective experience.*

JPM: To tell the truth, I am not aware of that many positivist attempts at quantification in the cinema. For Michotte, phenomenology was very important, and I wanted to take this even further. Phenomenology was important even for anthropologists like Morin. They were a little outside of Husserlian phenomenology and philosophical questions in the strict sense, but they made reference, in some way or another, to lived experience. Semiology evacuated this entirely and saw everything in terms of language, while forgetting that, even in Saussure, there are references to lived experience. Lived experience was eliminated, except in psychoanalysis, where there

is a recourse to lived experience through the concept of the Imaginary as conceived by Lacan.

I don't know if you know Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's book *Relevance*.[10] The writers wanted to show that when you understand someone, it's like a proposition, you place what they say in a propositional logic, in order to discover what they meant to say. Sperber and Wilson understand the mind as a simple machine, a computer. But how can they say that if they did not have the feeling of actually having to reason, at a given moment, in order to understand what someone has said? There is always a reference to lived experience in order to elaborate any theory whatsoever – even in theories that deny lived experience. For a major part of cognitivism, the mind functions in a non-conscious way, like a robot. But in order to say this you have to have feelings... By this I mean that, even in the cognitivist current, which has said very interesting things, personally, I have always maintained that theoretical elements rest on an implicit lived experience being made explicit, and that we should not make implicit lived experience a purely unconscious, automatic thing, which is what Sperber and Wilson do.

Resorting to a computational model of the mind does not seem adequate anymore, even in cognitive science where ideas of the embodied mind have long replaced the so-called first-generation cognitivism. Does your critique also hold for contemporary neuroscience?

JPM: Yes, just take the problem of mirror neurons. This is an important problem for identification. It was discovered that, when a macaque watches another macaque doing something, the activated neurons of the one who watches correspond to those of the one who acts. So scholars like Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, who are perfectly respectable figures, say: we are now finally understanding the comprehension of other people. But phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty (and Hesnard, who took inspiration from Merleau-Ponty) have long understood that, in order to comprehend someone else, there is a mimesis which makes one's own body capable of resonances with a perceived body, which allows me to understand someone else. It is not reasoning that allows us to understand someone else, it is the resonance of bodies. The neuroscientists have only been able to give this explanation because they themselves, in their lived experience, feel that we are capable of resonating with the bodies or actions of other people. Without this lived experience, it is impossible to understand the functioning of mirror neurons.

There's a primacy of experience – only then can we go on to formulate scientific explanations?

JPM: Exactly. The neuroscientists think that they have found an explanation. But they only show electric charges, and that's it. They don't know how to give meaning to them, they don't get any closer to lived experience. You can't ascribe any meaning to the activation of neurons if you do not relate it to lived experience.

If we move away from a critique of other methods and look at phenomenology itself: what would you say are criteria for good phenomenology?

JPM: There must be an intersubjective accord, the only confirmation can be an intersubjective recognition! This is an old philosophical problem that goes back to Husserl, the problem of the transcendental subject, the transcendental ego. Why did you ask this question?

Because it is extremely vital for the whole film-phenomenology movement: there are certain strands that have a different understanding of phenomenology than others, and it would be helpful to know from someone who has practiced film-phenomenology what one could say to people how you can discover that this is good phenomenology – and that is not. What are your criteria?

JPM: It's a question I've also asked myself. There are first-person approaches, of course, but there is also a second-person approach, which relies on questionnaires, etc., and whose goal is to revive lived experience. The problem of all phenomenology is to let lived experience come to the surface in order to explain it, to render the implicit explicit. But it is true that we never did this in an entirely satisfactory manner.

In France, Claire Petitmengin has done interesting studies on second-person phenomenology.[11]

JPM: Also Natalie Depraz, who is a Husserl specialist, wrote an article with Francisco Varela and Pierre Vermersch which I found very interesting, "La réduction à l'épreuve de l'expérience" ("Reduction to the Feeling of Experience"), in a journal called *Études phénoménologiques*.[12] Methodologically, it's interesting, because the writers try to explain how to let the implicit surface and make it explicit. I think that this is still a problem. Merleau-Ponty went beyond the dogmatism that you find in Husserl and Sartre. But the

language you use to make the implicit explicit remains marked by layers of culture. In the end, I think that rendering lived experience explicit is an infinite work, which has numerous intersections with intersubjective experience. Second-person phenomenology can be useful, but it still doesn't exhaust the problem.

Many feminist film phenomenologists take as a point of departure the difference of the female experience. For you, this was not so crucial in The Structures of the Film Experience.

JPM: In our empirical investigation of Cayatte's *La Vie conjugale*, it was quite obvious that male and female viewers did not have the same projection on the characters: what they resonated with in the character's bodies was not exactly the same. Here we have a *difference*. But the common point is that both project something, and the fictional character of fiction lends itself to putting oneself into the other much more than a real being. Here we have a point in *common*.

Hence you are saying the structure of identification is the same?

JPM: Yes, the common point is that we all constitute – by projection and identification – the experience of a character via our own experience. The difference is that we do not project the same thing, because, depending on whether we are a man or a woman, we do not have the same background.

Just like Merleau-Ponty and Sobchack, you are saying that phenomenology is never complete. If you go back to The Structures of the Film Experience, *what would you say is incomplete about it?*

JPM: There's something I'd like to do, but I'm not sure if I will end up doing it. In the article that I wrote for Julian Hanich and Christian Ferencz-Flatz's *Studia Phaenomenologica* issue, I began a kind of synthesis between the earlier and the later book. I would try to begin, very simply, with the phenomenology of the unreal. I would not begin with Sartre's different attitudes or ways of positing existence. I would say: how does the unreal appear? And I would try to graft onto that the problems of the home movie and the documentary, the reference to the real. I would invert my procedure somewhat. Instead of beginning with the three attitudes, or ways of positing existence, I would start with the phenomenology of the unreal. I would try to better understand what happens when, instead of simply letting myself

believe in the unreal, I target someone who exists. What does generalization, in the sense in which Sartre spoke about it, mean? What is a generalizing gaze, as compared to a gaze that remains in the singular? This is a question that has stayed with me, and that I would like to develop.

Likewise, what I would like to develop much more is the question of fictional emotions. If a character is fictional, what is the emotion that is projected? In *Essai sur l'image et la communication*, I said that we project all the schemas of existence of the fictional person we see. But as Merleau-Ponty said, in reality the rage of my friend is not really my own rage, I just feel it. Whereas in the cinema it is my rage that I project. What, then, does a rage that is unreal, played at, mean? What is an unreal rage, an unreal fear, etc.? This is a problem that I think it is necessary to go deeper into. We should not simply limit ourselves to saying 'play at.' What does 'play at' mean? A phenomenology of emotion seems very important to me.

So when you have the feeling of rage or fear as a film-viewer, it is not a real sentiment, but it is a sentiment that is played at by the spectator?

JPM: It is played at. It is projected by the spectator.

You are claiming that we don't really have these feelings? We do not leave the cinema in terror, for example?

JPM: Right. It's all play. There is a gap in phenomenological descriptions of viewer emotions.

There is already this importance of play in The Structures of the Film Experience *when you speak of child's play, role-play. When children play 'cowboys and Indians,' for instance, they don't totally believe in the game. They are also in reality. They are not totally subjugated to the illusion that they truly are 'cowboys and Indians.' There is a kind of double existence at this moment, which is comparable to watching a film.*

JPM: This is something I wish to describe better. What does it mean to be afraid through a character? It means being double, as you said. It's the "I know very well… but all the same…," as another psychoanalyst, Octave Mannoni, said. But there is a powerful sense of forgetting, otherwise it would have no interest. If you were simply double, there would not be much interest. You are double because you know that you play, but all the same, you get lost in

the game. Sartre called it fascination. I read a novel, and I am fascinated by it. I can't let go of it. But at the same time you know that you are fascinated.

Does the fact that we are faced with images make this phenomenon more powerful in the cinema than when reading a novel, where the images are purely fictional or imagined? In the cinema, the images *are real.*

JPM: Yes, when you read a novel you have to construct images. But Metz said interesting things on this topic. For instance, he critiqued the notion of film grammar: There is no grammar in the cinema. Nouns, verbs, the subjunctive, etc. – there is no need for them. It is language that needs nouns and verbs and so on, in order to construct an image, but not the cinema. There is certainly a much stronger level of participation. This is what makes the cinema interesting. But to say it is stronger is not saying much. How is it stronger? How can we distinguish belief in literary characters from belief in the characters of a fiction film or a graphic novel? My grandchildren get lost in comic books. They really get inside them, but at the same time they know they are reading.

There is a remarkable passage in your book when you say that there are moments in films where the emotion produced by a scene – such as the scene from Mikhail Kalatozov's The Cranes Are Flying (Letyat zhuravli, *1957*) *– is so strong and intense that it produces a refusal in the spectator, who has a kind of defense mechanism against the emotional intensity of the on-screen world. The spectator doesn't withdraw from the film because the emotions are unreal and therefore weak, but because they are too strong.*

JPM: When this happens, the viewer refers to a *possible* reality.

So you refer to your own experiences of having a similar emotion to that which you see on the screen?

JPM: Look at news images. When we saw the little Syrian boy dead on the beach, it was atrocious, because we experience this boy as a real kid. We knew that he really played with toys, that he really had parents, and this is what was unbearable. If you see the same thing and you know that it's a fiction, it's the same thing but there is less intensity. But if, at the moment that you see the fiction, you think that it is possible, then it can be just as intense. When I saw the image of the Syrian boy, I was completely overwhelmed, and when I see fiction films, in which horrific

things happen, then this can evoke real images, and then it too becomes unbearable. But it is not the fictional image as such, it is because it refers to the real, because we know that somewhere in the real it is possible. Or take another example: not long ago I saw a film on the round-up at the Vel d'Hiv in 1942, *La Rafle* (*The Round Up*, 2010) by Roselyne Bosch, and in one of the scenes you can see a French cop separating a child from its mother. This is fiction, but for me it was very disturbing, because I said to myself that it must have been possible in reality. If you only see the fictional side, it's much less intense. But if you think that it is possible, that there really were children separated from their parents, then the emotion becomes much more intense. It's a problem of interference between the unreal and the real.

In fiction, you need to have a certain verisimilitude.

JPM: There is a great American film, *Jeremiah Johnson* (Sydney Pollack, 1972), where you see Robert Redford living with an Indian woman and child. He had profaned a sacred Indian site, and he returns home to his cabin, where he finds that his Indian wife and child have been killed. This is pure fiction, but when I saw it, it really touched me, because the dead wife and child made me think that things of this nature really do happen. It almost became a documentary, a quasi-documentary, and the emotion became much stronger. These fiction films are so evocative of real dramas that our emotions become charged. And there is yet another problem of emotion in the cinema: the problem of collective emotions. Even if it is played at, it becomes strong from the fact that many people are constructing it together. There are mimetic resonances.

This brings us to one thing missing in your book: You accept that the film spectator is a spectator in a cinema, whereas even in 1969 films were seen on television. Today, we can say that the majority of films seen by people are watched on screens that are not cinema screens. Does this change the nature of the film experience for you if we no longer have this collective experience?

JPM: The question is: are there fundamental differences in structure or meaning or is it more a matter of degree? If I am sitting at home with my wife and we watch TV, it's not the same thing as if I were watching the film in a theater with others on a big screen. But in the end, I think that this is a question of intensity, a question of degree. It's the same thing but lessened.

Notes

1.   The interview took place on two occasions. The first part was conducted in Frankfurt am Main on 23 November 2017; the second conversation was held in Louvain-la-Neuve on 12 April 2018.

2.   Edgar Morin, *L'Esprit du temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1962).

3.   Alphonse de Waelhens, *La philosophie et les expériences naturelles* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961).

4.   See Jean-Pierre Meunier, "L'impact du film sur le public: 'La vie conjugale' d'André Cayatte," Centre des techniques de diffusion, Document no. 2, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1965.

5.   Jean-Pierre Meunier, "Le problème de l'identification filmique reconsideré," in Christian Ferencz-Flatz/Julian Hanich (eds.), "Film and Phenomenology," special issue of *Studia Phaenomenologica* 16 (2016), pp. 241-268.

6.   Jean-Pierre Meunier, *Essai sur l'image et la communication* (Louvain-la-neuve: Cabay, 1980).

7.   See "Psychoanalyse et cinéma," *Communications* 23 (1975), eds. Raymond Bellour, Thierry Kuntzel, and Christian Metz.

8.   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. by Alden L. Fisher (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 [1942]), p. 187.

9.   Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," trans. Alan Williams, in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 281-298. Original in *Cinéthique*, no. 7-8, 1970.

10.   Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

11.   See, for instance, Claire Petitmengin, "Describing One's Subjective Experience in the Second Person: An Interview Method for the Science of Consciousness," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 5 (2006), pp. 229-269.

12.   Nathalie Depraz, Francisco Varela, and Pierre Vermersch, "La réduction à l'épreuve de l'expérience," *Etudes phénoménologiques* 5 (2000), pp. 165-184 .