

Example of a micro-phenomenological interview¹

"Think of an elephant"

J. So Chantal, I spoke to you earlier about an object, in fact I lied to you slightly. It's not an object that I'm going to ask you to think of. I'm going to ask you, right now, to think of an elephant.

C. *Silence (5 seconds), then nods her head, smiling.*

J. OK. So what we're going to do now is... how can I say this to you? It's as though we had a video recorder: we're going to go backwards, and then we're going to replay the sequence, and then we'll see what you did to think of this elephant. OK? So it's very easy, as you've just done it, so we're just going to rewind, and to do that I'm going to ask you to immerse yourself again in this experience. Remember, I started out by saying that I had lied to you: I would like you to hear again my voice telling you: "I lied to you. It's not an object that I'm going to ask you to think of. I'm going to ask you to think of an elephant." So you did something, something happened. At the moment I said to you: "Think of an elephant", what did you do, what happened?

C. The first thing that happened is blackness, that is the screen was not lit. Or rather it had reset itself, it had been erased, as in fact I was not prepared for evoking an elephant.

J. I'm often going to repeat what you say to me, which will enable me first to make sure that I have understood you correctly, and then as the information comes, it will help me to memorise. Don't hesitate to tell me if I am wrong, for that can happen, if what I repeat does not exactly correspond to what you did, to what you experienced, OK? In fact, according to what I understand that you experienced, there was me saying: "Think of an elephant", and what you tell me is that first there was blackness, or more precisely there was the screen, and then the screen reset itself, because you were not ready to evoke an elephant. Can you describe this screen to me? Let's go back in time. You were saying to me: "There is this screen, there is blackness." How does it reset itself, this screen?

C. (...) I think... gradually.

J. Gradually...

C. The images fade away to leave something new behind.

J. Gradually, the images fade away to leave something new behind. What you are going to do

¹ Appendix to Claire Petitmengin, "Describing one's subjective experience in the second person: an interview"

now, Chantal, is that you are going to return into this experience. Hear my voice again. I said to you, remember, I said to you: "Chantal, I lied to you earlier. It's not an object that I'm going to ask you to think of. I'm going to ask you to think of an elephant". And then there is this screen, and you tell me there are images on the screen. What kind of images are there on the screen?

C. (...) When you told me it was not objects, that is some objects of which I had vaguely thought, well they had to be erased.

J. They had to be erased.

C. That's why I pulled across a screen¹.

J. You pulled across a screen so as to be able to erase them?

C. (...) To push them away. They were quite blurred but they moved away gradually as the screen opened.

J. All right. A screen that came and put itself in front?

C. In front. Very... very clearly. From the left to the right.

J. Very clearly, from the left to the right.

C. In front of me, I could see it from left to right.

J. You saw it coming from left to right, and it came right in front of you.

C. That's right.

J. What size was it, the screen?

C. ...

J. Find it again, start again. Now you can do that very well. Go back in time, find my voice again: "You know, Chantal, I lied to you. It's not an object that I'm going to ask you to think of. I'm going to ask you to think of an elephant." And then there are a few residual objects, and this screen. What size is it, the screen?

C. (...) It's not very big, but even so it fills all the space that I can see.

J. It's not very big, but even so it fills all the space that you can see.

C. It's about one metre by forty centimetres, wider than it is high.

J. All right. This screen that arrives from the left to the right, about one metre by forty centimetres, wider than it is high, what colour is it?

method for the science of consciousness", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Science* (2006) 5:229-269

¹ The word "screen" is used to translate the French word "écran", which means a surface used to hide (screen) something else. This surface will then be used, in the rest of the experience, as a background for the candidate pictures. It must not be understood as an imaginary TV or movie screen.

C. Ah, it's black.

J. It's black, that's what you said at the start: there's blackness, or rather there is the screen. All right, we have a few more details about this very short moment. I'm going to ask you for a final check about that. We haven't finished the interview yet, as for the time being we are preparing for the coming of the elephant. We know there are these objects, there is the screen that arrives from the left to the right, one metre by forty centimetres, which is black. Check if there isn't something else in your experience: are there any feelings? Are there any sounds? Check. Go back in time.

C. (...) Yes, there are some noises of objects moving away, of the screen opening. A little noise, a little noise that... that tells me something is happening.

J. A little noise that tells you something is happening, that gives you information about...

C. That gives me information... yes, about the opening of the screen.

J. That's it, the screen is there... what happens just afterwards? It's very important to start from scratch, because gradually, perhaps you will become aware of other elements, or not, or that it was not exactly like that. Because we are going deeper and deeper into this experience of thinking of an elephant. Let's go back to the beginning again. Become conscious of what happened for you immediately after the opening of this screen.

C. (...) In fact, I think the screen didn't take up all the space. In fact I think there was already some movement, some movement at the bottom... of the screen. That is objects that were vaguely candidates moved away, the screen opened, and things were happening a little in front of the screen.

J. Things were happening in front of the screen...

C. Indistinct things, but that moved a very little.

J. All right. There was a movement...

C. That's right, a movement. Yes, so it wasn't a vacuum. It was something that... a sign of ...

J. A sign of what?

C. ... not necessarily life, but... animation.

J. And if you like... because all that is very short, it happened very quickly, almost like that (*snaps fingers*). To situate this in the unfolding, you are going to tell me at what moment the objects moved away, the screen arrived... how was all that organised? To tell me that, you have the words that I pronounced, when did it start? When I said to you: "You know, Chantal, I lied to you. I'm not going to ask you to think of an object. I'm going to ask you to think of an elephant". There, you have the words. How did it unfold? Run through it again.

C. (...) So, "I lied to you": it becomes grey-brown, the objects weren't very distinct but there was a form even so, and... afterwards there is a time of... of suspense, because... because in fact I had the idea that you were going to ask me to think of a person.

J. You had the idea, that's interesting, between the moment when I said to you: "I lied to you, Chantal, I'm not going to ask you to think of an object", and the moment the black screen appears from left to right, you have the idea that I'm going to ask you to think of a person. Is that right?

C. That's right.

J. It's another sequence to be inserted. We're not going to explore it, this sequence. What I suggest to you is that, because the elephant was nice, and I could see you were smiling broadly thinking about this elephant, we'll continue to go towards this elephant. Let this sequence unfold: "I lied to you, Chantal. I'm not going to ask you to think of an object, I'm going to ask you to think of an elephant". The objects are moving away, the black screen is arriving from the left to the right, and then what happened afterwards?

C. (...) Well then, from the bottom of the screen...

J. From the bottom of the screen?

C. From in front of the screen. That is when you said: "elephant", then my screen was drawn over. That is... it was drawn over quickly, yes. Then I could do something. So to fill the screen, from the front, there is something that appeared, and which I did not like, because I said to myself that an elephant was something else, and so I made another elephant loom up.

J. All right, all right. When I say: "elephant", your screen is already drawn across, there is this movement that is there, this slightly indistinct movement you were talking of earlier, which is there at the front of the screen. When I say "elephant", does what looms up first come out of that zone, that rather indistinct zone, or from another zone in the screen? Run through it again, the best thing is to run through it again. "I lied to you Chantal, I'm not going to ask you to think of an object. I'm going to ask you to think of an elephant."

C. (...) Oh no, it looms up from somewhere else. That is I first said: "Elephant, Asia"...

J. You said: "Elephant, Asia". You pronounced those words internally, you spoke to yourself.

C. Then, there was a maharajah who appeared from the front of the screen, on his elephant... So there he was on the screen (...) And then I wanted to transform.

J. That's what you said earlier: you said: "That's not an elephant", and you made something else loom up.

C. No, I didn't say that to myself. I said: "I don't want that elephant".

J. Exactly, you said: "I don't want that elephant."

C. Because... there's another one waiting.

J. How did you know there was another one waiting?

C. (...) Because it was on the left, on the left of the screen... there was something... that was waiting.

J. There was something that was waiting on the left of the screen.

C. And then I remembered... where it was, that elephant. I said to myself it was that one that I wanted... to see.

J. I'll run through the whole sequence again, to see if I've taken all that in. And at the same time that enables you to check as we run through all that, to check if we are accurate in this description. It started like this: I said "You know, Chantal, I lied to you. I'm not going to ask you to think of an object. I'm going to ask you, right now, to think of an elephant". Here your screen is already in place. You say to yourself: "Elephant, Asia". And there's a maharajah on his elephant who arrives. And at the same time you know that on the left there is something waiting. You say to yourself: "I don't want that elephant." Then you remember there is an elephant, from where it is, and it arrives...

C. And it gradually appears. It is gradually revealed on the screen.

J. Starting from the left? How does it happen?

C. No, it was waiting on the left, but it... because... it's an image of an elephant I saw a short time ago... unusual. So I had to concentrate a little bit to remember the details.

J. To remember the details, you had to concentrate. It was something... it was an image that was waiting on the left, what was it?

C. No, it wasn't an image that was waiting on the left. It was something. It was a *presence*.

J. It was a presence. And it is this presence that makes you recall this elephant, at any rate that indicates it was there, and then you concentrate to remember the details.

C. That's right.

J. And afterwards, it appears gradually, little by little. Like a fade-in, how did it appear?

C. Afterwards it's me who places a little... the details.

J. It's you who places the details.

C. Yes.

J. How do you go about placing the details?

C. First I place the surround, because it's an image that is taken from a documentary, during the Vietnam War, where you see an elephant push... help to push trucks to get them out of the

mire. So I had to see the décor, the trees, the mud, the trucks... and so this elephant. (...) Yes, the elephant was the last to appear.

J. The elephant was the last to appear. So there, you had indeed followed the instruction of thinking of an elephant. It's at that moment that you knew that the instruction had been followed. At what moment did you know: "OK, I'm thinking of an elephant"? At what moment?

C. Yes, when I saw... when I saw it move.

J. When you saw it move, when you saw the elephant move in the décor you had reconstituted, then you knew that the instruction had been followed. If you like, we'll just run through a little passage again, I still have one or two questions to ask you. I think it's interesting to see how you say to yourself everything that you do, that is: "Elephant, Asia", "I don't want that elephant". So we'll run through the sequence again, I'll ask you about the auditive aspects of your experience. I say to you: "I lied to you Chantal, I'm not going to ask you to think of an object. I'm going to ask you to think of an elephant". Then the screen is already there. You say to yourself: "Elephant, Asia". Just afterwards, the maharajah appears.

C. Yes, I hear lots of things, of course. I hear lots of things because... Asia, maharajah... that means... I hear... The images I see are those where there are these rather hackneyed images of maharajahs, so I hear the sound of these films, that's what I hear.

J. All right, auditively, there are several things. Could we say in a way that there is your inner voice that says: "Elephant, Asia", and the image that appears with the sound of the image.

C. That's right.

J. "Elephant, Asia", it's your inner voice that says that. Where does it come from, if you had to define the location of this voice, where would you put it? Run it through again, let it come back, the voice. When you say to yourself: "Elephant, Asia", just before the image appears.

C. (...) It is in front of me, it is a little bit behind the screen.

J. A little bit behind the screen?

C. Yes, above.

J. How would you describe the volume of the voice: strong, weak?

C. Weak... weak normal.

J. Weak normal. And the tone, the intonations? It's fast, it's slow?

C. It's slow, it's light, it's smiling.

J. Slow, light, smiling. Continue. Afterwards there is an image that appeared, with the sound of those old films accompanying the image. And immediately afterwards you say to yourself:

“I don’t want that elephant”.

C. So then, the voice is not the same, no, it did not come from the same place.

J. So where did it come from?

C. There, it came from somewhere on the left.

J. It came from somewhere on the left. And how would you describe it, in terms of volume, intonations...

C. Well, it was... (...) it was another voice.

J. What do you mean by: "It was another voice"? I’m going to ask you a rather funny question, but if I wanted to have the same voice, how would I go about it? I know it comes from the left, but... would I have to speak loudly? How would I have to speak to have the same voice?

C. No, it was no louder than the previous voice, but... it was mine. Whereas the one before... no, it wasn’t mine... more impersonal.

J. A more impersonal voice. One last flashback, and then we’ll stop there. Just to check, and then do it one more time completely. You sat down, and straight away I said: "You know, Chantal, I lied to you. I’m not going to ask you to think of an object. I’m going to ask you, right now, to think of an elephant". And then the screen is there. The voice is there. The image, the music corresponding to the image. And then a presence on the left of the screen, and your effort to place first all the details, the trees, the mud, the trucks. And then this elephant. And then this elephant that moves, and you know that the instruction has been followed. At that moment, I say to you: “OK”... Other elements that appear?

C. Just, when you said “OK”, the light dimmed.

J. The light of the image dimmed.

C. The light of the whole thing.

J. The light of the whole thing. One more point: in terms of feelings, we haven’t talked about it, but was there a succession in terms of inner feelings. Different inner states, or was it something continuous? I can see you are running through it again...

C. (.....) Perhaps an initial sensation with the first sketchy impression of an elephant, the feeling of something... beautiful.

J. The feeling of something beautiful.

C. And then another feeling when I made the other one appear, I was... I felt good that I had reactivated this image.

J. You felt good that you had reactivated this image. How did you know that you felt good? The feeling of feeling good, what is it? Where is it, what’s it like?

C. (...) It's... in a way it's an absence of feelings... a sort of... balance.

J. A sort of balance. Well we'll stop there. Thank you, Chantal.