

introduction



For an inquiry dedicated to description, phenomenology is surprisingly difficult to describe. Collected here are essays presented to our so-called Society for Phenomenology and Media, as though we already understand how we are a society or understand this phrase “phenomenology and media.” Looking them over, noting their disparateness, we could be drawn into despair. We could see a fleeting, evanescent, or virtual society, a bunch of individuals pursuing their own ends and temporarily gathered out of external necessity.

We could note their methodological and thematic wandering, call it incoherence, and declare this phenomenology out of joint. We could point out that these essays concern narrow aspects of media, that they do not approach the phenomena in similar or even compossible ways, that they represent a cultural perspective and belie a persisting cultural prejudice.

We could even deny that certain of these essays are phenomenological at all.

That despair would imply a preconception of phenomenology we should interrogate before we give in to it. How should the unity of phenomenology, of a phenomenological inquiry, or of a society of phenomenological investigators be constituted?

If phenomenology had been a school of thought, it would have been surpassed already. The unity of phenomenology would have been a matter of the arrival on the scene of a group of like-minded persons in pursuit of the same goal or joined in allegiance to a set of fundamental principles. This would define phenomenology in terms of a list of axioms, or a tradition of texts and authors. There is superficial evidence of this: we repeat Edmund Husserl’s famous phrase “to the things themselves” as if it were a mantra, for instance; and we divide ourselves into sub-units and sub-disciplines (“existential” phenomenologists, “Heideggerians,” “phenomenological sociologists,” etc.). But these divisions are more apparent than fundamental, and Husserl’s phrase serves more as a slogan than a law.

If phenomenology had been a methodological doctrine, it would have revealed its limitations. Established procedures would have dictated a direction for research and fixed our sights onto predetermined targets. Only such “things” as we had planned to encounter would be included in our inquiry. We would be unable to account for anything that had escaped our notice, and an insight that was less than comprehensive would seem to have failed utterly. The incompleteness of our research and our own subjective standpoints would throw us into a crisis of competing speculations. Yet phenomenology remains a commitment to the things themselves, to which phenomenologists turn their attention and from which they gain insight.

If the unity of phenomenology as a rigorous science is not to be found in a tradition or a demonstration from first

principles, if phenomenology has no specific disciplinary boundary, its synthesis nevertheless can be discovered in descriptions and analyses. We should not expect to agree to describe the same “things” or to describe them the same way; we should expect, instead, to come to terms with one another on the only “thing” that matters, that is, the life-world itself. We should hope to find ways to form a community of inquiry capable of withstanding these difficulties and coping with our differences.

None of this is easy. The rigor of phenomenological description is difficult enough to achieve, but all the more important is the shared pursuit of this discipline especially when the nature of that discipline itself can become a matter of disagreement. We are engaged in a phenomenological study of media. This means that we are concerned to describe and analyze media. For some of us, this description and analysis is set out by the method of epoche and reduction. For some of us, epoche and reduction appear to result in a subjectivism that is to be eschewed. For some of us, “phenomenology” represents a tradition of philosophical reflection, a tool for social criticism or cultural exploration. For some of us, the “media” are a social construction of meaning rather than an established category of artifacts. For some of us, the “media” are the tools of producing virtuality; for others, of representing reality; for still others, of dismantling reality; for yet again others, of producing reality.

Even this should not necessarily cause us to despair. Phenomenology is unique in its call for constant theoretical self-searching, its zig-zag course, its perpetual beginning. In short, it seems to me that phenomenology must remain open to and can even gain from its encounters with others - other things, other researchers, other perspectives, other theoretical standpoints - insofar as these others belong to the same life-world.

So, while the essays to follow represent a certain hodge-podge of approaches, some only loosely connected to what appears to be the core of Husserl’s program, there is something to be gained from our treating them and one another with interest and concern. We could only say that we have failed to meet the mark if we presume to know where the mark stands, and that failure would be our own, more than that we judge to have failed. Even at their worst, when such analyses amount to a caricature of phenomenology, they can sometimes still present a clue. There is almost nothing utterly useless for phenomenological inquiry.

On the other hand, phenomenology must be more than a bunch of clever remarks meant only to pique curiosity. Merely describing, or analyzing through the means of phenomenological concepts, does not reach the necessary level of rigor. What is called for is the evocation of aspects of the life-world, through statements that direct attention and uncover experience, without presuming to present the simple and final facts. Indeed, the necessary rigor is not expressed in any essay presented here, not because they have all ‘failed,’ but because the rigor is not to be found in stated results of research. As Husserl suggested in “The

Origin of Geometry,” it is in the “reactivation” of theoretical statements and scientific results that their meaning is authentically or self-evidently taken up and can be advanced. Presented here are attempts to direct phenomenological insight toward things, toward the life-world. By necessity, none of them can present the things, none of them can be ‘complete.’ The task of understanding is the reader’s.

Not all of the essays presented in La Jolla are printed in this issue of *Glimpse*, for reasons of space, thematic fit, and appropriateness. The first block of essays, including this year’s keynote address by Bina Gupta and papers by Paul Majkut, Dennis Skocz, Carolyn Cusick, Beata Stawarska, and David Koukal, share a concern with a sort of unconcealment of what is hidden in media and media relations. The topics range from deception to surveillance to community to advertising, but in my view each in its own way contributes to an understanding of the experience of concealment in experiences of media.

The next block of essays, including papers by Dorothea Olkowski, Tina Chanter and Athena Colman, Stephen Crocker, and Kenneth Liberman, are more or less focused on how revelation takes place in media (primarily in film and video). Here again, the specific topics vary from issues of sex, gender, race, sexuality and politics, to digital video of details of highly stylized debate techniques, to narratives, images and perspectives as such, yet each paper investigates the capacity and means by which media reveal or show something.

The final block of three essays, by Janez Strehovec, Krystyna Wilkoszewska and Marc Van den Bossche, consider the media in terms of meaning, especially aesthetic meaning. Once again varied focal topics - from the production of new realities to the general issue of aesthetic understanding to nihilism - nevertheless center around the general theme of interrogating media as meaning-producing.

The Society for Phenomenology and Media has now held three Annual Conferences, each more expansive than the preceding. In expanding there is a risk of becoming general and some of the essays presented here demonstrate this generalizing tendency. The problem that presents for us as a community of phenomenological researchers (as opposed to a conference of academics) is to find a way continually to re-compose ourselves as a community. Ironically, some of us have found ourselves pursuing phenomenological research into media precisely because of our intuition that media have made community problematic. It would be a more painful irony if the Society for Phenomenology and Media became an academic organization, as this tendency to generalization pressures it to become. Once more, and above all, phenomenology is an endless task in this case, the endless task of resisting this pressure when it threatens the possibility of community, and the endless task of forming this community. My continued hope is for an expansive community, an open community of researchers engaged with one another in a serious effort to understand media.