

# Introduction

*The object . . . [is] to describe the animation of the human body, not in terms of the descent into it of pure consciousness or reflection, but as a metamorphosis of life, and the body as “the body of the spirit.”* —MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952–1960*

This is, perhaps, an “undisciplined” book, informed as it is by my multidisciplinary grounding and interests in film and media studies, cultural studies, and—an oddity in the United States—existential philosophy. Nonetheless, however undisciplined, the essays brought together in *Carnal Thoughts* are not unruly. Indeed, whatever their specific subject matter and inflection, they share a single overarching theme and emerge from a single—albeit quite open—method.

The major theme of *Carnal Thoughts* is the embodied and radically material nature of human existence and thus the lived body’s essential implication in making “meaning” out of bodily “sense.” Making conscious sense from our carnal senses is something we do whether we are watching a film, moving about in our daily lives and complex worlds, or even thinking abstractly about the enigmas of moving images, cultural formations, and the meanings and values that inform our existence. Thus, whether exploring how we are oriented spatially both off and on the screen or asking about what it means to say that movies “touch us,” whether considering the ways in which technology from pens to computers to prosthetic legs alter the shape of our bodies as well as our lives or the difference between the “visible” and “visual” in an image-saturated culture, or whether trying to think through the “reality” of certain screen images or the way in which our aesthetic and ethical senses merge and emerge “in the flesh,” all the essays in this volume are focused on the *lived body*. That is, their concern is not merely with the body as an abstracted object belonging always to someone else but also with what it means to be “embodied” and to live our animated and metamorphic existences as the concrete, extroverted, and spirited subjects we all objectively are. First and foremost, then, I hope the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* “flesh out” and contribute a descriptive gravity (if also an occasional levity) to the now

extensive contemporary literature in the humanities focused objectively (but sometimes superficially) on “the body.” The focus here is on what it is to *live* one’s body, not merely *look* at bodies—although vision, visibility, and visibility are as central to the subjective dimensions of embodied existence as they are to its objective dimensions. In sum, the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* foreground embodiment—that is, the lived body as, at once, both an objective *subject* and a subjective *object*: a sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble of materialized capacities and agency that literally and figurally makes sense of, and to, both ourselves and others.

In concert with this overarching theme, *Carnal Thoughts* adopts a method and critical practice guided by existential phenomenology. As philosopher Don Ihde characterizes it, existential phenomenology “is a philosophical style that emphasizes a certain interpretation of human *experience* and that, in particular, concerns *perception* and *bodily activity*.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, existential phenomenology is philosophically grounded on the carnal, fleshy, objective foundations of subjective consciousness as it engages and is transformed by and in the world. Thus phenomenological inquiry focuses on the phenomena of experience and their meaning as spatially and temporally embodied, lived, and valued by an objective subject—and, as such, always already qualified by the mutable specificities and constraints of history and culture. In this sense embodiment is never a priori to historical and cultural existence. Furthermore, counter to an ahistorical and acultural idealism, the phenomena of our experience cannot be reduced to fixed essences; rather, in existence they have provisional forms and structures and themes and thus are always open to new and other possibilities for both being and meaning. Thus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher whose focus on embodiment transformed transcendental (or constitutive) phenomenology into existential phenomenology, tells us that “the greatest lesson of the [phenomenological] reduction is the *impossibility* of a complete reduction.”<sup>2</sup> Instead of seeking essences, then, a phenomenological approach seeks, in a given case, the meaning of experience as it is embodied and lived in context—meaning and value emerging in the *synthesis* of the experience’s *subjective* and *objective* aspects.<sup>3</sup>

1. Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 21.

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “What Is Phenomenology?” trans. John F. Banner, *Cross Currents* 6 (winter 1956): 64.

3. For those readers unfamiliar with the history, philosophy, and method of phenomenology (both transcendental and existential), see Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965). For elaboration of existential phenomenology in particular see David Carr, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Incarnate Consciousness,” in *Existential Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. George Alfred Schrader Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 369–429. For a gloss on and demonstration

Given both my choice of theme and method, as the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* accumulate in their descriptions and interpretations of embodied experience, it is my hope that their weight and occasional gravity demonstrate how the very nature of our embodied existence “in the flesh” lays the concrete foundations for a *materialist*—rather than idealist—understanding of *aesthetics* and *ethics*. That is, what I hope arises from the volume as a whole is an appreciation of how our own lived bodies provide the material premises that enable us, from the first, to sense and respond to the world and others—not only grounding the logical premises of aesthetics and ethics in “carnal thoughts” but also charging our conscious awareness with the energies and obligations that animate our “sensibility” and “responsibility.” This is a bottom-up emergence of aesthetic and ethical sense as it is written by carnal experience on—and as—our bodies rather than a top-down and idealist imposition on them. In this regard, although the essays that follow focus on particular (and sometimes personal) instances and experiences, these instances are used to open up (rather than close down) our understanding of our more general and always social entailments with others—and, indeed, to suggest the intimate and materially consequential bonds we have (whether we deny or embrace them) with all others and all things.

If the overarching aim of *Carnal Thoughts* is to contribute to a description of, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the animation of the human body” and “the body as ‘the body of the spirit,’” this aim must be put into context. As noted, “the body” has been a major focal point for scholars in contemporary humanities and cultural studies. Nonetheless, more often than not, the body, however privileged, has been regarded primarily as an object among other objects—most often like a text and sometimes like a machine. Indeed, even in overt criticism of the ways in which the body has been objectified and commodified in our contemporary image-conscious and consumer culture, many scholars tend to try to redeem the body, as Thomas Csordas writes, “without much sense of bodiliness in their analyses.” Such a tendency, he continues, “carries the dual dangers of dissipating the force of using the body as a methodological starting point, and of objectifying bodies as things devoid of *intentionality* and *intersubjectivity*. It thus misses the opportunity to add sentience and sensibility to our notions of self and person, and to assert an added dimension of *materiality* to our notions of culture and history.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Csordas notes, contemporary scholars tend to “study the *body* and its transformations while still taking *embodiment* for granted,” but “this distinction between the body as either an empirical thing

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of phenomenological method see Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (New York: Paragon, 1979).

4. Thomas J. Csordas, introduction to *Embodiment and Experience*, ed. Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4 (emphasis added).

or analytic theme, and embodiment as the existential ground of culture and self is critical.”<sup>5</sup> Hence the need to turn our attention from the body to embodiment.

Embodiment is a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*. Thus we matter and we mean through processes and logics of sense-making that owe as much to our carnal existence as they do to our conscious thought. Furthermore (and responding to the occasional critique of phenomenology as aiming toward a too facile—and “happy”—adequation of consciousness and bodily being), the irreducibility of embodied consciousness does not mean that body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, are always synchronously entailed or equally valued in our intent or intentionality or that our body and consciousness—even at their most synchronous—are ever fully disclosed each to the other. Furthermore, they are not, in a given experience, necessarily equally valued—sometimes body and sometimes consciousness preoccupy us, and—as in the reversible but differently weighted senses of our existence as “objective subjects” and “subjective objects”—one may hold sway over the other. In sum, as Gary Madison writes: “The perceiving subject is itself defined dialectically as being *neither* (pure) consciousness *nor* (physical, in itself) body. Consciousness . . . is not a pure self-presence; the subject is present to and knows itself only through the *mediation* of the body, which is to say that this presence is always mediated, i.e., is indirect and incomplete.”<sup>6</sup>

Given that the irreducible ensemble that is the lived body is dialectical and, as Madison says, “never succeeds in coinciding with itself” and thus never achieves a fixed identity,<sup>7</sup> all of the embodied experiences I describe in the essays to follow are not engaged with a naïve sense of experience as “direct.” That is, however direct it may seem, our experience is not only always mediated by the lived bodies that we are, but our lived bodies (and our experience of them) is always also mediated and qualified by our engagements with other bodies and things. Thus, our experiences are mediated and qualified not only through the various transformative technologies of perception and expression but also by historical and cultural systems that constrain both the inner limits of our perception and the outer limits of our world. Indeed, as I hope the phenomenological investigations in *Carnal Thoughts* will demonstrate, direct experience is not so much direct as it is

5. Ibid., 6.

6. Gary Brent Madison, “Did Merleau-Ponty Have a Theory of Perception?” in *Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas Busch (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 94.

7. Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 25.

*transparent*—either because we are primarily intending toward the world and our projects and not toward our modes and processes of perception and expression or because we are historically and culturally habituated so that what is given to us in experience is taken for granted rather than taken up as a potentially open engagement with the world and others.

Thus, although phenomenology begins its descriptions with an experience as it seems directly given in what is called the “natural attitude” (better called the “naturalized attitude”), it then proceeds to “unpack” and make explicit the objective and subjective aspects and conditions that structure and qualify that experience as the kind of meaningful experience it is. Furthermore, although it may begin with a *particular* experience, its aim is to describe and explicate the *general* or *possible* structures and meanings that inform the experience and make it potentially resonant and inhabitable for others. That is, although in historical and cultural existence particular experiences may be lived idiosyncratically, they are also, and in most cases, lived both generally and conventionally—in the first instance, according to general conditions of embodied existence such as temporality, spatiality, intentionality, reflection, and reflexivity and, in the second instance, according to usually transparent and dominant cultural habits that are not so much determining as they are regulative. In sum, a phenomenological description and interpretation, on the one hand, attempts to *adequate* the objective and subjective aspects of a given embodied experience and, on the other, also seeks to acknowledge their historical and cultural *asymmetries*. This means attending not only to the *content* and *form* of embodied experience but also to its *context*. The proof of an adequate phenomenological description, then, is not whether or not the reader has actually had—or even is in sympathy with—the meaning and value of an experience as described—but whether or not the description is resonant and the experience’s structure sufficiently comprehensible to a reader who might “possibly” inhabit it (even if in a differently inflected or valued way).

Given its emphasis on “thick description,” phenomenological inquiry is also often consciously attentive to and reflexive about its own use of language. Certainly, this is meant to achieve philosophical precision (sometimes I spend a very long time trying to choose just the right preposition because of the specific relational and spatial structure it articulates). However, this attentiveness to language is also aimed at really listening to and reanimating the rich but taken-for-granted expressions of vernacular language and of rediscovering the latter’s intimate and extensive *incorporation* of experience. As Paul Ricoeur writes: “Ordinary language . . . appears to me . . . to be a kind of conservatory for expressions which have preserved the highest descriptive power as regards human experience, particularly in the realms of action and feelings. This appropriateness of some of the most

refined distinctions attached to ordinary words provides all phenomenological analysis with linguistic guidelines.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, in this volume, my tendency to draw not only from specialized philosophical or theoretical works but also from everyday speech, film reviews, advertisements, jokes, self-help manuals, and other popular sources written for and understood by a mass audience. These sources not only foreground the vitality of ordinary language but also suggest a certain common or general understanding of certain embodied experiences—and point to their broad resonance even as they never strike exactly the same chords in every body.

In regard to both language and experience it is my hope that the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* are relatively user friendly, as contrasted with my earlier—and (in my view) historically necessary polemic—*The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Not only do I avail myself of an array of popular sources, but also many of the essays in the volume are grounded explicitly in representations of autobiographical and/or anecdotal experience (mine as well as others). Nonetheless, these representations of personal or “subjective” experience—and the bafflement they sometimes express—provide the beginning of inquiry rather than its end. Indeed, grounding broader social claims in autobiographical and anecdotal experience is not merely a fuzzy and subjective substitute for rigorous and objective analysis but purposefully provides the phenomenological—and embodied—premises for a more processual, expansive, and resonant materialist logic through which we, as subjects, can understand (and perhaps guide) what passes as our objective historical and cultural existence. Thus, as Rosi Braidotti writes, it is “particularly important not to confuse [the] process of subjectivity with individualism or particularity: subjectivity is a socially mediated process. Consequently, the emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, ‘external’ to the self while it also mobilizes the self’s in-depth structures.”<sup>9</sup>

Although many of my colleagues assume that both my interest in embodiment and my use of the autobiographical anecdote began with my experience of cancer surgeries, the amputation of my left leg about ten years ago, and my subsequent incorporation of the prosthetic leg that will make its presence known in several of the following essays, this is not the case. As a female in our culture and often brought up short by the inconsistent and often contradictory ways in which my material being was regarded and valued (or not), I have always found “being a body” not only strange but also

8. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 321–22.

9. Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Malden, MA: Blackwell/Polity Press, 2002), 7.

relative. Hence my turn to existential phenomenology with its focus on embodiment and the structure of experience—and this long before the amputation and the novel bodily experiences that followed, which, given my curiosity, made my body (not “the” body) a very real (not virtual) laboratory for phenomenological inquiry. In such extreme circumstances I was able to reflect not merely on my pathological situation but also to use it—as phenomenologists often do—to reflect on the usually transparent and normative aspects of being embodied, learning as much during my recovery from my (supposedly) present leg as from my (supposedly) absent one. Even the words *present* and *absent* were up for interrogation—their taken-for-granted representations inadequate to my actual lived-body experience. In this regard (if in another context) Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt are apposite:

In the larger perspective of the cultural text, representations . . . cease to have a settled relationship of symbolic distance from matter and particularly from human bodies. The way bodies are understood to function, the difference between men and women, the nature of the passions, the experience of illness, the border line between life and death, are all closely bound up with particular cultural representations. The body functions as a kind of “spoiler,” always baffling or exceeding the ways in which it is represented.<sup>10</sup>

If, however, the body in general always baffles and “exceeds” its representation, then it is also the case—and this became very clear to me as I was recovering and trying to find the words to express the concrete particularity of my experience to myself as well as others—that “my body” (and “yours” insofar as I or you speak or write of it) can sometimes find symbolic expression adequate to—and even extending—its experience. Hence, I would suggest, the contemporary turn to autobiography and anecdote can serve not only as a spoiler but also, dare I say, an antidote to objective accounts of the body that don’t tell us what we really want to know about our living of it.

Finally, to the bodily accounts themselves! *Carnal Thoughts* is divided into two sections: “Sensible Scenes” and “Responsible Visions.” Although all the essays in the volume deal with the lived body as it experiences technical and technological mediation of some kind (often but not always cinematic), these sections are inflected differently. The first focuses on the exploration of certain experiential scenes of representation and “conundrums” that become intelligible and find their provisional resolution not in abstraction but in the lived body’s concrete and active “sense-ability.” Emphasis in this section is on how our carnal thoughts make sense and sensibility not only of the lived body’s subjective sense perception but also of its objective repre-

10. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 15.

sentations. In “Breadcrumbs in the Forest: Three Meditations on Being Lost in Space,” I explore various forms of spatial perception and the embodied experience of being spatially disorientated to ask whether there are different shapes and temporalities of “being lost” that constitute different existential experiences and meanings—in our culture, particularly in relation to gender. “Scary Women: Cinema, Surgery, and Special Effects” pursues the scene of aging at a time when our bodies are subject to transformation not only by the techniques of surgery but also by the technologies of cinema. In these first two essays movies are not the focal point of inquiry although they do serve as illustration and reference and, I hope, are in turn illuminated by the larger worldly and fleshy context for which they have been mobilized. The next two essays move more particularly toward the screen, specifically dealing with cinema. “What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh” attempts to understand the embodied structures that allow for more than a merely cognitive or rudimentary knee-jerk cinematic sensibility and attempts to demonstrate how cinematic intelligibility, meaning, and value emerge carnally through our senses. “The Expanded Gaze in Contracted Space: Happenstance, Hazard, and the Flesh of the World” explores the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of the cinematic gaze, not only as it has been theorized in philosophy but also as it has been specifically embodied and enworlded with others and things in the extraordinary materialist metaphysics articulated in the films of Krzysztof Kieslowski. The last two essays in the section explore the phenomenology of what has been called “the signifying scene”—particularly as this is mediated by the literal incorporation of various expressive and perceptual technologies that function not only as tools but also as spatially, temporally, and materially transformative. “Susie Scribbles”: On Technology, *Technē*, and Writing Incarnate” takes its title from an electronic “writing” doll bought at Toys R Us and looks at the physical activity and techniques of writing, as well as at writing instruments whose various materialities transform not only our consciousness of space and time but also the expressive sense and shape of our bodies. The last essay in the section, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic ‘Presence,’” continues this exploration, turning particular attention to our embodied engagement with the perceptual technologies of photographic, cinematic, and electronic imaging and how they have significantly altered both our sense of the world and our sense of ourselves.

The second section, “Responsible Visions,” is also grounded in the lived body’s sense-making capacities but is focused on those experiences and representations that tend to evoke our carnal “response-ability” and constitute the material foundations for ethical care and consciousness and, perhaps, responsible behavior. Again, the emphasis is on the concrete lessons taught us by our “carnal thought.” “Beating the Meat / Surviving the Text, or How to Get Out of the Century Alive” is a critique of those who,

in the contemporary critical moment, view the body solely as a text and thus gleefully “disabuse” it, disavowing the lived body’s vulnerability to pain and wishing away—often through writing—the mortality that gives us gravity. “Is Any Body Home? Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions” continues this exploration of the contemporary objectification of the body but, through consideration of three case studies, connects it to an ethically impoverished sense of vision whose accountancy is only in the visible. My cancer surgeries, amputation, and prosthetic leg make their inaugural appearance in these first two essays but are foregrounded in the third. “A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality” looks at the recent “sexiness” of the prosthetic as metaphor and attempts to responsibly—and materially—reembody and reground it in a phenomenological description of both the prosthetic’s figural and literal use—not only by me but by other cultural critics and amputees. The next two essays are related, the one a further extension of the other. “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary” is interested both in what it means to “represent” death on the screen, particularly in documentary, and in how—and in what modalities—such representation also represents the “ethical gaze” of the filmmaker and “charges” an ethical response from the spectator. Indeed, the second and related essay is called “The Charge of the Real: Embodied Knowledge and Cinematic Consciousness” and, picking up where the previous one left off, focuses on this sense of the real in both documentary and fiction and the way it is constructed not only from extracinematic knowledge but also from a “carnal knowledge” that radically charges it with response-ability. The last essay in *Carnal Thoughts* culminates not only the volume but also, and in many ways, the book’s emphasis on the way in which we cannot set ourselves apart from—or above—our materiality. “The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity” most explicitly demonstrates that we are both—and irreducibly—objective subjects and subjective objects and that it is only by virtue of our radical materiality that any transcendent sense we have of the beauty of things or obligation to others can emerge and flourish. In this regard *Carnal Thoughts* could be said to be demonstratively polemical. That is, by looking closely at what we material beings are and at how we sense and respond to the world and others (never directly, purely, or “nakedly”), I hope that our image-conscious and visible culture might reengage materialism at its most radical and come to recognize as precious both the grounded gravity and transcendent possibilities not only of our technologies and texts but also of our flesh.

In sum, it is my hope that the essays in *Carnal Thoughts* play some small part in making explicit the embodied premises that we implicitly live in a process of constant transformation and that they encourage a deeper and more expansive regard for the incredibly transcendent material that we are.

