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METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE FOR SCREEN SENSE: A CASE FOR PHENOMENOLOGY

Russell J. Cook

Loyola University Baltimore, MD United States
4501 N Charles St, Baltimore, MD 21210
Email: rjcook@loyola.edu

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True philosophy consists of relearning how to look at the world
— *Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (2002, p. xxiii)

This philosophy paper addresses the question of why phenomenology is the best research method for investigating visual perception of screen media, or screen sense. Disciplines cannot be justified adequately by assumptions that give rise to them. A scientist's duty to question founding assumptions is satisfied only by stepping outside one's own tradition to acquire a critical perspective. Thus, integrity in scientific inquiry rests on openness to criticism from perspectives outside one's own traditions, a consciousness of tolerance. Phenomenology claims for itself a capacity for such critical self-reflection and openness to multidisciplinary debate[1]. In summary, methodological validity for the study of screen sense begins with a phenomenologist's

1 Pilotta, J. J. & Mickunas, A. Science of communication: Its phenomenological foundation. Hillsdale, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates. 1990.

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openness to criticism and moves through critique of other perspectives toward an authentic, unified investigation.

Naturalism is the prevailing theoretical standpoint of the positive sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and physiology. The natural standpoint assumes that the only valid experiences are caused by empirically detectable objects of the material world *(positivism).* Later disciplines of economics, sociology, and psychology adopted positive science's cause-and-effect logical empiricism; accordingly, internal psychological states are correlated one-to-one to external events *(psychologism).* Any internal events, such as thoughts or emotions, are assumed to be responses to empirical causes.[2]

The phenomenological movement arose to respond to the failure of the natural standpoint's cause-and-effect thinking to answer important questions about the meaning of human existence, questions that dwell in the "in-between" region at the nexus of internal and external life. Figure 1 visualizes the philosophical standpoint of phenomenology as located at the center of a methodological critique of the natural standpoint – in the region between mind-subject and world-object, between psychologism and positivism, and between idealism (mentalism) and empiricism.

As the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty[3] says, "It is into this in-between that we must try to advance". Phenomenology emphasizes the lived body's situation in the world, which turns out to be vital for understanding screen sense. The methodological critiques in this paper do not claim that psychologism and positivism are wrong within their own objectivities. Rather, the claim here is that phenomenology takes up experiential investigations of screen sense that do not fit within positivism or psychologism. In sum, critical appraisal of the disciplines will enable science to situate spectator consciousness in its appropriate epistemological context.

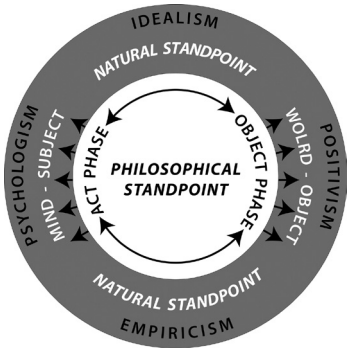

Figure 1. Methodological Critique of the Natural Standpoint and the Philosophical Standpoint. Illustration by author.

2 Pilotta and Mickunas, *supra note* 1, pp. 24–25.

3 Merleau-Ponty, M. Signs. (R. C. McCleary, Trans.). Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press. 1964. p.166.

The proceeding sections of this methodological critique follow the chronological development of the disciplines: 1. Positivism: is screen sense a physical fact? 2. Psychologism: is screen sense a mental construct? 3. Common sense: what are the natural standpoint's presuppositions about screen sense? 4. Epoché: Can naturalistic presuppositions about screen sense be neutralized? 5. Eidetic reduction: how can the essence of screen sense be obtained from screen phenomena? 6. Conclusion. The goal of this methodological critique is to assert the phenomenological method's validity for human research in general and for screen sense in particular.

1. Positivism: Is screen sense a physical fact?

Based on the philosophy of logical empiricism, the procedural steps for positivism's *scientific method* are well known. Positivist theory of science boasts many accomplishments in the material realm of human endeavors – such as curing diseases, boosting food production, controlling the environment, harnessing energy, increasing labor efficiency, and building transportation and communications networks.

Positivism's ideology also prevails (sells) in the world of screen entertainment. Popular U.S. TV courtroom, police, and procedural investigation dramas celebrate the indubitability of physical evidence. The immensely popular "reality" shows cynically trade on the audience's faith in a positive existence with constructed performances that pass for reality. Television news and sports promulgate the positivist ethos of empirical eye witnessing, crystalized in the "live" broadcast and "slow-motion replay." The movies have equivalent examples in the fantasy genres, which foster their own founding "realities" paralleling the spectator's empirical existence.

However, in the field of philosophy, positivism's efforts to explain human consciousness have been much less successful, owing to the inaccessibility of mental processes to logical empiricism. First of all, cause-and-effect, the ruling proof for knowledge in the positive domain, cannot be experienced empirically; no encounter with two empirical facts labeled *cause* and *effect* can legitimate their connection. Their link can be forged only by idealistic, non-empirical logic, such as statistics.[4] Secondly, positivism cannot show that certain mental states *cause* specific behaviors or vice-versa; such demonstrations are limited to equivocal expressions of association, difference, and tendency. For example, eyestrain is a subjective experience not reducible to empirical components. Even with verified observations of behavior (duration of screen exposure) or measurements of biological functions (dilation of the pupil of the eye), such correlations of external and internal events fail to demonstrate causation. Bound by its requirement for externally verifiable evidence, positive science does not accept self-reports of subjective experience ("I feel eyestrain.") because they

4 Husserl, E. Experience and Judgement: Investigation in a Genealogy of Logic. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press. 1973. p. 392.

are not "objective." No amount of procedural rigor will enable positivism to bridge the "in-between" region separating the empirical world from consciousness.

Positivism operates according to certain untested, unnoticed assumptions, which merit closer scrutiny. One assumption concerns the nature of scientific knowledge. According to logical empiricism, the only valid knowledge that science can have is caused by objects of the physical world and associated psychological events – the *constancy hypothesis*. This hypothesis asserts that human perception is consistent, and that the same stimuli will produce the same sensations; i.e., human sense organs are passive transmitters.[5] Though most positivist scientists do not question that non-empirical human experiences not traceable to physical reality do indeed occur, but they simply are regarded as valueless to science.

Some aspects of screen sense strenuously resist reduction to empirical facts. The screen-mediated apparition itself is difficult to circumscribe empirically. Can it be captured wholly by patterns of retinal and tympanic stimulation? Can contextual factors of environment, memory, and association be observed and measured? Can spectating be reduced to stimulation of specific regions of the human brain, as physiologists have attempted?[6] Even if such reductionist explanations were feasible, wouldn't they overlook mental activities of a spectator's consciousness negotiating with the screen? Screen sense does not reside *in* a spectator's brainpan, nor *in* the screen medium, but instead *between* spectator and screen – a region not accessible to research tools calibrated strictly for material reality.

Another reason for positivism's failure to access screen sense is its banishment of direct, personal experience from scientific judgment – so-called *self-elimination*. [7]This hallmark of the scientific method can be traced back to the fourteenth century invention of the clock, which gave birth to the modern conception of time, attention to observability and reproducibility of events, and the "romanticism of numbers".[8] All phenomena are assumed to be reducible to empirical data interpretable simultaneously by all observers. Unobservable subjective states are considered non-objective and unreliable. Sampling techniques are devised to remove data inconsistencies. Individuating "error" factors hampering generalization are "controlled." Positivism's anti-subjective bias traps it in the paradoxical position of denying its own subjectivities necessary for observation, measurement, and theory formation. Generalizations are derived from atomistic empirical particulars without consciousnesses to perform the observing and generalizing. The usual generalizing function, statistical probability, is assumed to provide objective results based on laws of logic, but even these results must

5 Merleau-Ponty, M. Phenomenology of perception. (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge. 2002. p. 9.

6 De Kerchove, D. Connected intelligence: The arrival of the web society. Philadelphia: Kogan Page. 1998.

7 Merleau-Ponty, *supra note* 3, p. 99.

8 Mumford, L. The monastery and the clock. In *Technics and civilization*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. 1963. p. 332.

be absorbed, interpreted, and communicated by humans. Positivism is not able to account for the subjectivities embedded in its assumptions and method.

Positivist science's urge to eliminate personal judgment from the production of knowledge also has disembodied intelligence.[9] Elimination of bodily experience from empirical observations is particularly problematic for a study of spectating's embodied performance. How a spectator interpolates embodied audiovisual perspectives from watching an episode of a TV sitcom, enacting a virtual persona in a multiplayer online role-playing game, piloting a spaceflight simulator, or browsing a social networking website can never be derived from spatio-temporal data points provided by kinesthetic analysis of observed organic movements. The embodiment of screen experience defies positivist reduction.

Phenomenologists do not deny or discount the accomplishments of positive science in general[10] or positive contributions to empirical realities impinging on communication phenomena in particular.[11] As phenomenology's founder, Edmund Husserl[12] said, "Science is alone concerned with the experienceable real fact-world". But his lament for positivism is that it is not positive enough – it does not go deep enough into the facts as they present themselves in direct experience to allow for complete knowledge: "If by *'Positivism'* we are to mean the absolute unbiased grounding of all science on what is 'positive,' i.e., on what can be primordially apprehended, then it is *we* [phenomenologists] who are the genuine positivists."[13] By "primordially," Husserl means a deep probing of consciousness prior to self-awareness and prior to imposition of metaphysical constructs such as scientific laws. By "apprehended," he means constituting (grasping) the essence of a whole thing interpolated from a stream of fragmentary sensory impressions. Phenomena of screen-mediated things are not reducible to the impressions. Phenomenologists attempt to probe beneath the fact-surface of phenomena such as screen specters to discover transcending structures of consciousness, such as meaning, essence, and typology.[14]

2. Psychologism – Is screen sense a mental construct?

As a young professor of mathematics in the 1880s, Husserl searched for verification of *psychologism's* claim that mathematics and logic do not have *a priori* validity outside

9 Weizenbaum, J. Computer power and human reason: From judgment to calculation. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman. 1976.

10 Patton, M. Q. Qualitative evaluation and research methods (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications. 1990. p.14.

11 Pilotta and Mickunas, *supra note* 1, p. 34.

12 Husserl, E. Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology. (W. R. B. Gibson, Trans.). New York: Collier Books. 1962. p. 74.

13 Husserl, *supra note* 12, p. 78.

14 Pilotta and Mickunas, *supra note* 1, p. 34.

of psychology. He became intrigued with psychologist Franz Brentano's new method of introspection to probe for the origin of logic in one's own thoughts. A decade later, public refutation of Husserl's investigations by the respected mathematician and philosopher Gottlob Frege[15] Husserl to conclude that logic and mathematics cannot be grounded in psychology, and, further, that there are no psychological images or representations between awareness and its objects. Consequently, Husserl's first book on his new phenomenology, *Logical Investigations*[16], emphatically distinguishes phenomenology from psychology and rejects all forms of psychologism.

Because virtually anything having to do with psychology has been labeled *psychologism* at one time or another[17], we need to clarify what Husserl rejected. He said psychologism starts with the premise that the human mind is a *closed box,* the inner workings of which cannot be observed directly by others. Following from the closed box premise is the conclusion that introspective examination of one's own thoughts and feelings cannot be validated by others and therefore has no scientific validity. Behavioral psychology moved in this direction of discounting introspection.[18]

For Husserl, psychologism's denial of introspection raises problems. As a method, psychologism requires observers of behavior but paradoxically locates the observing consciousnesses outside its system and does not account for them. As a theory, the psychologistic standpoint leads to the conclusion that logic and science have no universal validity apart from empirical validity. All criteria for distinguishing the logical superiority of one thought to another are banished. In effect, logic is eliminated. For example, the psychologistic standpoint does not recognize the law of non-contradiction. A contradictory statement such as, "I can hear the sound and I cannot hear the sound," is regarded by psychologism as merely a description of an observed response to a private experience. A judgment that such a statement is false requires a prescriptive logical framework *prior* to experience and *outside* of empirical reality, but psychologism prohibits such idealistic frameworks.

As empirical particulars never can demonstrate universality, psychologism ultimately collapses into *relativism* – truth is only what an individual person thinks it is. Relativism leads to another contradiction. If all truths are individual and private, then there can be no universal truths for all people for all times, yet the denial of

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15 Frege, G. Review of Dr. E. Husserl's philosophy of arithmetic. In F. Elliston & P. McCormick (Eds.), E. W. Kluge (Trans.), *Husserl: Expositions and appraisals.* Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press. 1977. pp. 314–324.

16 Husserl, E. Logical investigations. (J. N. Findlay, Trans.). London: Routledge and Keegan Paul. 1970.

17 Pelletier, F. J., Elio, R., & Hanson, P. (2008). Is logic all in our heads? From naturalism to psychologism. In *StudiaLogica: An International Journal for Symbolic Logic*, 88(1). 2008. p.6; Ströker, E. *Husserlian foundations of science.* (L. Hardy, Ed.). Washington, D. C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology & University Press of America. 1987. p. 83.

18 Stewart, D. & Mickunas, A. *Exploring phenomenology: A guide to the field and its literature* (2nd ed.). Athens: Ohio University Press. 1990. pp. 17–18.

universal truths is itself a universal truth.[19] Logicians attempting to resolve the contradictions of psychologism in the light of more recent discoveries of cognitive science have encountered mixed results.[20]

3. Common sense: What are the natural standpoint's presuppositions about screen sense?

The *phenomenological reduction* or *epoché* illuminates presuppositions of the natural standpoint taken by positivism and psychologism and factors them out of phenomena. Another term for naturalistic presuppositions is *common sense* – our barely noticed coping with the world that we take for granted. Common sense helps us literally to *make sense* of the world, to make it cohere for us. Schutz[21] says the phenomenological method starts with common sense: "Common-sense thinking simply takes for granted, until counter-evidence appears, not only the world of physical objects but also the sociocultural world into which we are born and in which we grown up. This world of everyday life is indeed the unquestioned but always questionable matrix within which all our inquiries start and end".

Media spectating typically entails layer upon layer of background commonsense presuppositions. Some are easily recognized. Others are more difficult to ferret out. Three levels of presuppositions operate within screen sense – the practical level, the existential level, and the ontological level. At the practical level are habitual behaviors. Spectators function on "automatic pilot." Screen technologies are unnoticed in their being taken for granted, or "ready to hand." However, occasional problems with technologies cause the "ready-to-hand" to be is noticed in its absence – such as missing a television remote control, or encountering dropped cellular telephone coverage.[22]

Screen media content, despite its ephemeral nature, also has an aspect of being "ready-to-hand." Beneath the practical level of living are naturalistic presuppositions that found the existential coherence of screen media spectating. A common example of the presumed "ready-to-hand" in screen sense is the mode of appearance known as *direct address*[23], in which a person on screen makes eye contact with the spectator (see Figure 2). A mutual exchange of eye gazes between spectator and screen figure is

19 Pilotta and Mickunas, *supra note* 1, pp. 7–11.

20 Pelletier, F. J., Elio, R. & Hanson, P. (2008). Is logic all in our heads? From naturalism to psychologism. In *StudiaLogica: An International Journal for Symbolic Logic*, 88(1). 2008. pp. 61–62.

21 Schutz, A. Collected papers. (M. A. Natanson& H. L. van Breda, Eds.). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 1962. pp. 326–327.

22 Heidegger, M. Being and time. (J. Stambaugh, Trans.) (Revised.). Albany: State Univ. of New York Press. 2010, pp. 68–69.

23 Zettl, H. Sight sound motion: Applied media aesthetics (7th Ed.). Belmont, CA: Cengage. 2013. pp. 234–235, 323–324.

an embodied gesture that powerfully conveys recognition of the spectator as "ready-to-hand." A spectator prereflectively responds in a consistent manner to eye gazes across all media contexts, whether in a feature film, video chat, or television newscast. Only in reflective self-awareness (when we think about it) does it occur to us that the screen figure seeming to look at us might not in fact be seeing us.

Figure 2. Direct address illustrating naturalistic presupposition of the "ready-to-hand" in screen consciousness. Illustration by author.

In normal, non-screen socializing, we take for granted that a reciprocal exchange of eye gazes means something special. Deconstructed phenomenologically, the "look"[24] reveals multiple layers of meaning: (a) an appearance of another person in the perceptual field (other-as-object); (b) an awareness of being looked at (self-as-object); (c) recognition of the other person's awareness (other-as-subject); (d) the other person as a concrete instance of the possibility of there being other people in my world (other-as-intersubjectivity); and (e) the self is not the other and the other is not the self – a mutual understanding that Sartre calls *negation* or *alienation.* These latent layers of meaning gain their potency in the instant that our eyes exchange glances with another person, regardless of whether the exchange is mediated by an audiovisual screen.

In summary, direct address in screen media functions in the immediacy of two levels of naturalistic presumptions about the world. At the practical level, direct address is a spectator's access to a virtual "ready-to-hand" other person. At a deeper, existential level of the natural standpoint, direct address functions as a bond between the self and the other. The power of the eye gaze in mediated situations creates a

24 Sartre, J. P. Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology. (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). New York: Philosophical Library. 1956. pp. 374–383.

suspension of belief. As spectators in a movie theater, for example, we know that the movie star appearing to look directly at us from the silver screen in fact cannot see us. Yet, to be caught in the movie star's stare is so powerful a gesture that it startles us into self-consciousness. The same is true for a video chat.

Deep beneath the practical level of living and the existential level of spectating are more fundamental, usually unexamined, presuppositions about being in the world – the *ontological.* Rarely does one question one's own ontology, except in special contexts such as philosophizing or spiritual reflection. We perpetually carry our ontological beliefs with us like shadows and rarely question them. Ontological beliefs of the natural standpoint – including belief in the existence of a reality that is independent from consciousness – found the positive sciences, but they present a major obstacle to phenomenology.

The natural standpoint regards consciousness as merely another thing in the world – a passive, interior receptacle for psychological impressions of external things and forces. Phenomenology regards consciousness as far more than just a thing among things – it is an active collaborator with the world. To the natural standpoint, consciousness that is *in* the world and at the same time *collaborates* with the world appears paradoxical.[25] According to Husserl, making consciousness into a thing "is the basic mistake of psychologism (to which not only all empiricists and but also rationalists succumb). Whoever saves us from the *realization* of consciousness is the savoir of philosophy, indeed the creator of philosophy".[26]

4. Epoché: Can naturalistic presuppositions about screen sense be neutralized?

This paper's preceding critiques of positivism and psychologism establish phenomenology's general antipathy to reductive, overly simplistic explanations of consciousness. Husserl's discovery of a new way of understanding human experience – the philosophical standpoint – eclipses the natural standpoint of the positive sciences, including psychology. Embree and Dudash[27] note that the central insight of Husserl's mature philosophy was the discovery of the philosophical standpoint, which can move acts of consciousness, such as screen sense, out of the *ordinary* (natural standpoint) and into the *extraordinary* (philosophical standpoint). This transformation is

25 Van Manen, M. Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy (2nd ed.). Albany: State University of New York Press. 1990. p. 3.

26 Kern, I. The three ways to the transcendental reduction in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. In F. Elliston & P. McCormick (Eds.), *Husserl: Expositions and Appraisals* (pp. 126–149). Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press. 1977. pp. 144–145; italics added.

27 Embree, L. &Dudash, M. *A representation of Edmund Husserl [1859–1938].* Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Ont.June, 1988. [interactive]accessed June, 2014 at <http://www.lesterembree.net/husserlscript.htm>

accomplished, first of all, by starting from a point free of presuppositions – taking no aspect of a phenomenon for granted. Regarding screen sense, nothing is assumed by phenomenology – not the spatio-temporal world, not scientific theories about the world, not other human beings, not one's own body, not even logic. The only possible validation of cognitive experience of screen sense is itself.[28]

Husserl discovered a way to free consciousness from the natural standpoint—the *phenomenological reduction* or *epoché* – first announced in his *Lectures on the Thing* of 1907.[29] By a powerful act of reflection, we can seize our realist assumptions in order to suspend or "neutralize" them.[30] In the epoché, everything is scrutinized, and nothing is taken for granted.[31] Ströker[32] says the epoché or phenomenological reduction reveals to us how we make sense of the world:

> "[The phenomenological] reduction opens up a new domain of experience which has hitherto been completely unknown: a domain of intentional activities in which being, existence, reality, and ideality – ascribed to objects and events themselves in the natural attitude – gain their proper sense from those activities alone. In other words, transcendental consciousness is the ultimate 'source' of all sense-bestowing achievements thanks to which there is a world, or, for that matter, science."

The phenomenological reduction or epoché is not a "narrowing" of standpoint in the positivist sense of reducing objective existence to a single dimension. Rather, it "widens" an investigator's standpoint from the natural to the philosophical, revealing the objective world in its correlation to subjective acts of experience. The objective theme is contained within the new universal theme. This shift of standpoints in reflective consciousness is analogous to a transition from thinking in terms of two-dimensional area to thinking in terms of three-dimensional space, which contains in itself the second dimension and transcends it.[33]

The epoché's transformative power has elicited numerous metaphors from commentators. Ströker says the epoché is a "way of seeing things just as they are"[34]

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28 Farber, M. The foundation of phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and the quest for a rigorous science of philosophy. Piscataway, N. J.: Transaction Publishers. 1962. pp. 211–220.

29 Husserl, E. The idea of phenomenology. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 1964.

30 Ströker, E. Husserlian foundations of science. (L. Hardy, Ed.). Washington, D.C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology & University Press of America. 1987. p. 4.

31 Küng, G. The phenomenological reduction as epoché and explication. In F. Elliston & P. McCormick (Eds.), *Husserl: Expositions and appraisals* (pp. 338–349). Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press.1977. p.343

32 Ströker, *supra note* 30, p. 5.

33 Kern, *supra note* 26 , p. 127.

34 Ströker, *supra note* 30, p. 6.

and "utter strangeness".[35] The epoché's deep understanding of experience conforms to the original meaning of the word *reduction*, from the Latin *reductio,* meaning to lead back. The epoché leads back to the ground of all knowledge – pre-reflective experience – fulfilling Husserl's goal to make phenomenology a *first philosophy*.

From his 1907 lectures through to the end of his career, Husserl refined, extended, and restated the epoché. Two-thirds of the *Crisis,* according to Husserl's editor, is devoted to explicating it.[36] "There is probably no question over which Husserl spent more time – or to which he more often returned…".[37] The epoché has a companion procedure, the *eidetic reduction,* an analysis for deriving the essences of phenomenal objects. Spiegelberg[38] and Ströker[39] separately note that Husserl does not specify the sequence of the two reductions (the phenomenological and the eidetic), as they serve different purposes, nor are both procedures required. Full understanding and appreciation of the reductions comes only with doing them.[40]

The first step in performing the epoché is to suspend judgment concerning the existence or non-existence of reality. Husserl expresses the reduction variously as "inhibiting," "turning off," "putting out of action," or "detaching importance from" questions of what is "real" and what "exists".[41] Husserl[42] is emphatic that the phenomenological reduction does not *doubt* or *deny* the existence of the natural world in the manner of Cartesian doubt. Rather, the phenomenological reduction brings the natural standpoint's unexamined assumptions into sharp, clarifying relief, so that they may be separated from what directly appears to consciousness – the "given". The given is evidence that the subject is not a passive spectator of the world, but an active co-conspirator with it.[43]

Perception of pictorial depth is a good example to demonstrate how the epoché is performed. Common sense tells us that a pictorial artifact such as a photograph is a flat object with no thickness, having no *real* depth. Therefore, any sense of depth

35 Ströker, E. Investigations in philosophy of space. (A. Mickunas, Trans.). Athens: Ohio University Press.1987, p. 85

36 Biemel, W. The decisive phases in the development of Husserl's philosophy. In R. O. Elveton (Trans.), *The phenomenology of Husserl: Selected critical readings* (pp. 148–173). Chicago: Quadrangle books. 1970. p. 167.

37 Merleau-Ponty, *supra note* 3, p. xii.

38 Spiegelberg, H. The phenomenological movement: A historical introduction (3rd rev. and enl.). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 1982. pp. 708–711.

39 Ströker, *supra note* 30, p. 6–7.

40 Ihde, D. Experimental phenomenology: An introduction. Albany: State University of New York Press.1986.p.14; Ströker, E. Husserlian foundations of science. (L. Hardy, Ed.). Washington, D.C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology & University Press of America. 1987. p. 8.

41 Spiegelberg, *supra note* 38, pp. 118–123.

42 Husserl, *supra note* 12, p.100.

43 Merleau-Ponty, M. The structure of behavior. (A. L. Fisher, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press. 1963, p. 220.

that we get from looking at a picture, such as the landscape in Figure 3, must be the result of an *illusion* or trick of the eyes. Yet, the same common sense tells us that nearly everybody in normal life, including young children, easily and instantly can see depth in many different kinds of pictures. Indeed, mass media companies bank on the assumption that their audiences see pictorial depth in screen images.

Figure 3. An example of pictorial depth. Photo by author.

Psychological aesthetics[44], a discipline of the natural standpoint, particularizes pictorial "depth cues," including: *height in the visual field* (in the photo, the mountains are above the road), *occlusion* (the rocks in front of the water), relative size (progressively smaller road markers), *linear perspective* (lines of the guardrail and road converging to a point), *distance to horizon* (mountains closer to horizon than the road), *aerial perspective* (distant mountains pale and blurred), *texture gradient* (less detail in distant mountains), *attached shadows* (shadows *on* the guardrail), and *cast shadows* (shadow *under* the guardrail). Note that the spectator registers these depth cues prior to psychological recognition of categories of lived world things (road, guardrail, lake, mountains, clouds) or depth relationships revealed by motion. Photographers and painters are encouraged to learn about these depth cues and to use them strategically in picture making.

If we apply the epoché to aesthetic assumptions about pictorial depth, our perspective is shifted from the natural standpoint to the philosophical standpoint, and we are opened immediately to an undeniable, self-evident sense of depth in the landscape in Figure 3. The philosophical standpoint suspends all concern for illusions

44 Arnheim, R.Art and visual perception: A psychology of the creative eye(New version, expanded and rev. ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.1974. pp. 245–302; Zettl, H. Sight sound motion: Applied media aesthetics (7th Ed.). Belmont, CA: Cengage. 2013. pp. 160–175.

or tricks. With the existence and reality questions neutralized, we can begin to see pictorial depth *phenomenally,* that is, without theoretical reservations.

5. Eidetic Reduction: How can the essence of screen sense be obtained from screen phenomena?

By applying Husserl's *variational method*[45] to the phenomenological reduction of the natural standpoint, we can begin to recognize the essential characteristics of pictorial depth, in defiance of the naturalistic presupposition that pictorial depth is an illusion. Applying the variational method to a large print of the landscape picture in Figure 3, we note the following protocol of reflections on the object's presence to perception:

(1) When changing my viewing angle to the picture from side to side, I notice a curiously different quality of spatial depth from the surrounding area of the page. At one moment, the picture appears very deep indeed, followed in the next instant by an extreme "shallowing" of perceived depth, which never reaches complete "flatness." This first variation or way of looking shows that the perception of pictorial depth is not uniform and is affected by changes of vantage point; that is, *what* is seen is affected by *how* it is seen. The next variation probes another aspect of how depth is experienced.

(2) With a little effort, I learn that I can shift my visual concentration on the picture to affect the sense of depth I experience: narrowing the center of my focus on the picture seems to deepen it; decentering the visual focus brings more of the surroundings (the paper) into awareness, which seems to reduce the picture's depth. The deeper the picture appears, the more it takes on the aspect of a window, with its landscape receding behind the plane of the surrounding white page, and the more the surroundings appear to "flatten." Throughout narrowing and broadening my visual focus, however, the picture never appears to be part of the surrounding space; it always seems like "foreign territory."

(3) Further, I notice that the depth of the picture persists through various changes of angle of view from side to side; even at an extremely oblique angle of view, the picture still has depth, though reduced. In other words, pictorial depth resists complete obliteration despite extreme changes of viewpoint. In sum, if the visual impression is seen as a picture, it will have at least some minimal sense of depth.

(4) Looking at other pictures, I recognize similar performances of pictorial depth, with larger pictures or pictures held more closely appearing

45 Husserl, E. Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology. (W. R. B. Gibson, Trans.). New York: Collier Books. 1962. pp. 181–184; Husserl, E.Experience and judgment; Investigations in a genealogy of logic. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press. 1973. pp. 340–348.

somewhat deeper. The size of a picture in my visual field has some effect on depth perception. If I hold it closely enough to lose the edges of the picture in my peripheral vision, the sense of depth is maximized. I conclude that seeing the picture without the frame (even though I know it has a frame) makes the landscape appear deeper.

(5) I also notice that with practice, it becomes easier to shift my visual "cone" of concentration from broadly seeing the entire picture to narrowly concentrating on details, and back again.

(6) Suddenly I realize that, without noticing it, I have suspended concern for the spatial things (road, guardrail, lake, mountains) depicted in the pictures. I am able to look "past" the things and *to see the depth directly.*

Note that only Variation (4) changed *what* was looked at. The other five variations changed *how* it was looked at. All the manipulations influence the depth experience and together suggest how pictorial depth is *essentially structured.* Throughout the six variations, the changes in pictorial depth reveal themselves with increasing ease. I have begun to see the picture as a *phenomenon of consciousness* instead of a *factual thing of reality.* Throughout the phenomenological reduction and variational method, I never doubt the existence of the pictures, the things depicted in the pictures, or the psychological fact that pictorial depth is an illusion; the phenomenological reduction I performed psychically neutralized those concerns, so that I could see the pictures directly as they essentially appear. I made these discoveries by reflecting on the phenomena, while neutralizing all naturalistic assumptions, theories, and expectations about them.

The creative process typically also involves manipulation of perceptual standpoint. To manipulate their depth perception, pictorial artists such as painters, photographers, and cinematographers typically receive training in essential seeing that is very similar to the phenomenological investigative techniques described above. They learn to manipulate their "cone of attention" to explore spatio-temporal objects in their visual fields. A narrowing of awareness brings surface textures to clarity. Broadening or defocusing the visual field partially inhibits depth perception, which flattens things in the visual field, and which encourages seeing groups of shapes as gestalts or *compositions.* Artists also purposively manipulate their vision to increase contrast by "squinting" their eyes to reduce depth of field, perceived contrast, intensity of colors, and textural vividness.[46] Producers of audiovisual media exhibit a similar facility for shifting perceptual standpoint during the creative process.

Phenomenology educates a researcher's perception to perform a specialized way of sensing, including looking, hearing, and sense of balance. Both scientific and pedestrian sorts of theorizing are avoided. This pre-theoretical sensing requires rigorous training to break the theorizing habit. Theories are not shunned because

46 Martin, T. On sketching technique… tcmsculptures. 2011. [interactive] [accessed April 1, 2013, at<http://tcmsculptures.com/meanderings/on-sketching/20>

they are inherently bad or impractical; on the contrary, theories are an essential feature of what it means to be human.[47]

Reviewing phenomenological reduction's discoveries about pictorial depth perception, the natural standpoint assumes that: (a) any two-dimensional thing (such as the photograph in Figure 3) has no depth *that exists in reality;* (b) therefore, any perception of depth in a picture is *in reality* an optical illusion; (c) these naturalistic presuppositions are based on fact and are empirically provable; (d) yet, when the presuppositions are set aside and a phenomenological reduction of pictorial depth is performed, then depth is readily experienced in the picture; and (e) common sense is comfortable with the contradiction between the fact of two-dimensionality and the experience of three-dimensionality. The fact-world of pictures is totally incompatible with the phenomenal world of pictures, yet we routinely accommodate both worlds in practical life, particularly in our involvements with screen media. The human faculty for pictorial depth is an essential structure of screen sense, and it is good that it should be, for otherwise we would not be able to see audiovisual screens as pictures with depth.

Before leaving this eidetic reduction of Figure 3's pictorial depth, three additional variations of the phenomenon reveal more about its essential nature:

(7) The next variation alters the spectator's viewpoint: Try to look at the landscape in the figure as it is in reality from the natural standpoint (a flat pattern of pigments on the surface of the paper) instead of as a phenomenon of the philosophical standpoint (a window onto a depth-laden world). Variation (1) above moved the page from side to side; throughout a range of viewing angles, the depth perception persisted. For this variation, turn the page on its side. Suddenly, apprehension of spatial objects is disoriented: the road, lake, and mountains are more difficult to recognize. They threaten to lose their "thickness" and to be seen as irregular botches of pigment on the surface of the page. (Now, if I permitted naturalistic theories and assumptions to penetrate the philosophical standpoint, I would state the obvious: the picture is "wrong side up," i.e., the landscape is defying gravity. However, I must resist this inclination and suspend all notions of "correct" orientation.) This variation of viewpoint comes very close to obliterating pictorial depth, but as opposed to previous variations, the depth has now stabilized to a persistent shallowness throughout the range of side-to-side changes of viewing angle.

(8) Continue the rotation of the figure so that it is "up-side-down." The rotation for Variation (7) greatly impacted depth perception, but, surprisingly, this rotation to an "upside-down" orientation has little effect. "Sideways" or "up-side-down," the depth has the same persistent shallowness. It appears that the "right-side-up" orientation is in the background of my perception

47 Ströker, *supra note* 30, p. 18.

of things and that changing the point of view from or to that privileged orientation has a big impact on depth perception. The next variation is another manipulation of the manner of looking.

(9) Squint when viewing the picture. I immediately notice a blurring of surface texture and contours of shapes and an apparent increase in contrast: the dark areas look darker and the lightly-shaded area now looks lighter and almost (but not quite) blends into the surrounding whiteness of the paper. While focusing on the interior of the figure, my cone of attention narrowed. By some power of concentration, I can broaden my look to take in the whole figure at once. Suddenly, *the pictorial depth vanishes,* and then returns with a re-narrowing of view.

(10) Squinting at the picture that has been rotated back its original orientation does *not* cause pictorial depth to vanish. The landscape clings to its depth when I can recognize the things in it.

Summarizing Variations (1) through (10), we can draw the following conclusions about pictorial depth: (a) how we look at a picture can affect perception of depth in the picture; (b) lateral changes of viewing angle have little effect; (c) broadening the "cone of attention" to take in the entire picture, not focusing on any particular part of the picture, reduces depth perception; (d) rotating the picture out of "normal" orientation nearly eliminates depth perception; and (e) rotation combined with squinting the vision can eliminate depth perception altogether, causing the figure to appear as blobs of pigment on the surface of the paper.

Additional, more radical, manipulations of the figure – such as changing the colors of the image or its overall shape – might reveal additional essential structures of pictorial space, such as the role of body style in sense of orientation. However, this rudimentary demonstration of the variational method is sufficient to show how reflection on experience, for which naturalistic presuppositions have been neutralized, can bring a philosophical way of looking. This mode of reflection makes the experience seem *strange,* and in that strangeness the essential structures of the experience are brought into view.

Compare the elongated retinal impressions of the figure that inevitably result from oblique viewpoints and the relatively stable visual thing as apprehended: perception intuits its objects in true wholeness, not in fractured pieces of objects. If the naturalistic explanations of psychology were correct—if visual perception were merely the retina's response to light striking it, with attendant neural processes – then the changes of viewing angle would disrupt things we see. Figure 4 represents the inevitable contradictions between the visual stimuli received and the object apprehended – so-called *perspectival adumbrations*.[48]

Spectators at an oblique angle to the picture plane receive elongated visual impressions; nevertheless, they experience a whole, undistorted screen image. This

48 Husserl, *supra note* 12, pp. 117–120.

allowance for viewing angle is natural and taken for granted. Note that the simplified view of matters in Figure 4 does not depict psychological contradictions between eye-images transmitted to the brain and consequent mind-images, including inversion of retinal projections, contextualized color rendering, and binocular stereoscopy.

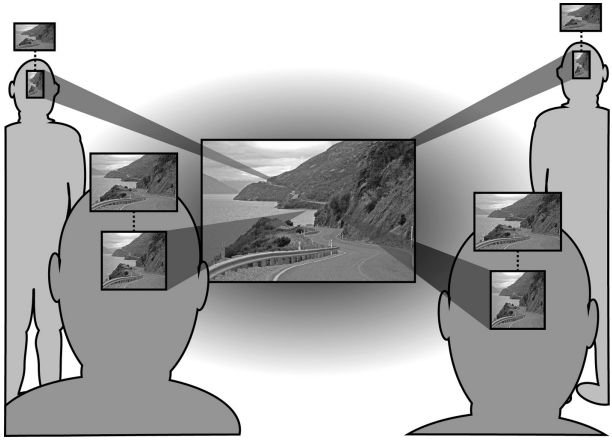

Figure 4. Perspectival adumbrations of screen spectating. Illustration by author.

In addition to perspectival adumbrations, screen perception entails numerous other complexities to be examined elsewhere, but this demonstration of the variational method applied to pictorial experience is sufficient to warrant two important conclusions at this preliminary stage of the phenomenological/eidetic reductions: (a) we are not passive receptors of visual data—consciousness plays some part in the perceptual process in ways that require careful analysis; and (b) the epoché and variational method help to reveal this essential activity of consciousness.

Conclusion

The preceding methodological critique scrutinizes Husserlian phenomenology from the perspectives of two other research paradigms – positivism and psychologism – and concludes that phenomenology is the best research method for investigating visual perception of screen media, or screen sense. This conclusion is based on the following reasons: (a) screen sense is neither a physical fact of the material world (positivism) nor a mental construct of psychic processes (psychologism); rather, screen sense is an active collaboration "in-between" a spectator-subject and an audiovisual screen-object (phenomenology); (b) positivism and psychologism presuppose various "common sense" assumptions about existence and reality in the natural standpoint that can inhibit true understanding of the meaning of spectating,

as in, for example, when exchanging glances with a screen performer (direct address); (c) Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction or epoché serves to neutralize presuppositions of the natural standpoint, enabling reflection to behold screen sense just as it is, in wonder and utter strangeness, with nothing taken for granted; and (d) Husserl's variational method of eidetic reduction moves the investigation of screen sense beyond the task of neutralizing naturalistic presuppositions to reveal essential structures of spectating experience.

Screen media are purveyors of pictures. Phenomenology can elucidate the pictorial experience they provide. An eidetic reduction of pictorial depth reveals that how we look at the screen can affect perception of depth in the screen image. Lateral changes of viewing angle have little effect. Broadening one's "cone of attention" to take in the entire screen reduces depth perception. Rotating the screen image nearly eliminates depth perception, and squinting eliminates it altogether. Variations in an experience of pictorial depth demonstrate that we are more than passive receptors of visual data, and that how we see affects what we see.

This introduction to the phenomenological method raises important questions for investigation of screen sense that are beyond the scope of this paper, questions that hint at the complex nature of screen sense in particular and human science in general. Husserl's phenomenological method makes great demands on communication research for intellectual integrity, historical understanding of the discipline, highly technical language, and careful, sensitive approach to phenomena under study. In return, phenomenology promises to provide a rich understanding of visual perception of screen media that is free of assumptions, open to criticism of other disciplines, and dedicated to achieving an authentic, unified investigation.

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Russell J. Cook, Loyola University Baltimore, Maryland United States, Professor. Research interests: Introduction to Communication, Introduction to Multimedia, Video Production, Video Animation, Documentary Film.