
Gabrielle A. Hezekiah, *Phenomenology's Material Presence: Video, Vision and Experience* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2010), 91 pp.

Reviewed by **Enrica Picarelli**

In the essay entitled “Lived Bodies: Phenomenology and the Flesh” (*Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, 1994, 86-111), Elizabeth Grosz identifies in the female body the source of a difference that unsettles the universal notion of corporeal experience articulated by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The notion represents the core of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical inquiry, which he takes, to extend it, from Edmund Husserl, for whom phenomenology sets out to “conduct research into essence within the framework of a reflection that involves ... absolute self-givenness” (Husserl quoted in Hezekiah, *Phenomenology's Material Presence*, 1); it occupies a central position in the research undertaken by Gabrielle Hezekiah in *Phenomenology's Material Presence*.

A brief introduction to the debate on phenomenology as voiced by Grosz follows. This theoretical aside is intended as a framing of Hezekiah’s study, which focuses on “materiality, perception and consciousness” (77), and provides a perspective to address some of the issues she raises, particularly the centrality of the body in the elaboration of a woman’s experience of the work of art.

The first phase of the phenomenological process starts with the body in its everyday encounter with the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, through experience and perception the phenomenologist acquires the means to establish that knowledge is situated in the world, which stems from the relationship he entertains with his corporeal schema. This phase prepares the ground for the moment of suspension that follows, when the (male) philosopher puts a distance between his natural perceptions and the realm of the phenomena in order to realize that consciousness is universal and constituted by absolutes. But the idea that consciousness is undifferentiated is criticized by many feminist scholars, for example Lucy Irigaray, Judith Butler and Grosz. The latter, in particular, maintains that it reproduces a masculinist preconception that takes male perception as a disembodied universal, ignoring the difference represented by the woman’s experience of her body as a source of desire. She writes against the approach pursued by Merleau-Ponty that links desire to derangement, emphasizing the role that sexuality plays in our relationship to the world, and arguing for a conceptualization of “voluptuous passion” as a defining element of the process towards self-perception (*Volatile Bodies*, 110). Her observations expose the bias of phenomenological critiques that ignore the sexual specificity of the perceiver; in particular, she states that if the body is the “vantage point from which I have a perspective”, it is also not affected by the same “dynamical force, with the same psychological structures and physiological features” that interest men (*ibid.*). Insisting on the positivity of

desire for a female apprehension of material existence, Grosz grounds in sexual difference the phenomenological search for the body image that informs Merleau-Ponty's inquiry. Turning desire into a source of otherness, she offers an insight into phenomenology that starts with difference and stresses immanence and irreducibility as the foundations of consciousness and presence.

Although *Phenomenology's Material Presence* is not directly concerned with sexuality and femininity, Grosz's observations provide a valuable starting point to comment on it. Hezekiah's aspiration to "stay ... with the trace of the viewing experience" (iii) resonates with Grosz's call for a positioned strategy of addressing perception, inviting the reader to focus on immanence and corporeality when approaching a video. It situates the origin of the research in the author's intimate approach to the video-art of Ghana-born, Trinidadian director and scholar Robert Yao Ramesar. As clarified in the preface, one of the aims of Hezekiah's research is, in fact, to address the body and how it is called into being by Yao Ramesar's pieces. She intends to write "into and towards" (ii) the relationship established by a "visual encounter" that addresses her eye and consciousness as a (female) individual (ii), and declares that the theoretical investigation informing the book moves from a subjective experience of the videos. At the same time, the recurring references to the aural dimension of the pieces, as well as to the materiality of the films, with their grainy and fickle texture, suggest an almost sensual involvement with the object of study. Even if not explicitly stated, these aspects seem to ground analysis in the author's senses, research being the hypersensible locus of an approach to video-art intended as a means to reach self-perception.

It is in this "experience of contact" (iii) that Hezekiah locates her scholarly interest in phenomenology, finding in the carnal appeal of the videos the 'dynamical force' of a personal journey into contemporary Caribbean art. The most interesting aspect of *Phenomenology's Material Presence* is the way in which the author recognizes the videos' ability to perform an original philosophical inquiry instead of reproducing it. Hezekiah argues for "[v]ideo's ontology – the nature of its being in the world" as being "at once immanent and transcendent" (76). She takes video as a source of original investigation, endowing it with critical and theoretical specificity. She observes that Yao Ramesar's pieces "enact phenomenology as method in the process of intending their way into the world, restoring us to that world by bringing the trace of presence, consciousness and perception through their material bodies" (76). This foundation successfully facilitates the passage from the subjective stance voiced in the preface to the theoretical position sustained in the book.

Phenomenology's Material Presence is intended as a piece of experimental writing that attempts to "see phenomenologically" through three videos produced by Yao Ramesar in the 1980's and 1990's – *Heritage: A Wedding in Moriah*, *Mami Wata* and *Journey to Ganga Mai*. It is very well grounded in pure phenomenological analysis, which it articulates thoroughly and in a lucid fashion, facilitating the approach even for readers unacquainted with this philosophical school of thought. Hezekiah dedicates a chapter to each video, which she reads in counterpoint to different

stages of the phenomenological inquiry, namely the psychological reduction, the transcendental and eidetic reduction and the immersion into Time and Being. All of them are strictly related to the theoretical framework established in the introduction, which provides an overview of the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophies represent the coordinates informing *Phenomenology's Material Presence*. The monographic analyses expose how the videos summon up the “commingling” (26) of individual perception and a broader form of consciousness. According to Hezekiah, this moment of contact corresponds to an experience of disembodiment that allows the perceiver to reflect on the act of perception and to witness the manifestation of the Heideggerian Being as it takes place in and through the video. She declares that video “exists for us as that space of openness that is the Dasein” (68) and that it is through the immersion into this abstract dimension that we are returned to ourselves with a heightened knowledge of the world.

According to Hezekiah, through techniques that lengthen and distort time, what is often regarded as an artistic object becomes the initiator of a process of deterritorialization that creates a gap in vision, allowing for something invisible and imperceptible to find its way toward consciousness. Focusing on “connections, intention and consciousness”, Hezekiah’s experience regards looking as “an act of theorizing” (iii) that takes subjectivity as a starting point to interrogate the process of vision and how vision is ‘made’. She states that Yao Ramesar’s insight into the everyday life of Trinidad and Tobago conjures up a compelling relationship between the viewer and the video’s bodies that make visible “a poetics of seeing and becoming” (i) that pertains to the nature of the Dasein. Thus, in phenomenological fashion, her study brings together the embodied nature of a material contact with the work of art, with an approach that interrogates abstract notions of “manifestation and the visual” (6). It is the interweaving of self-perception and “collective consciousness” that suggests “a theory of encounter grounded in embodied consciousness and a metaphysics of presence” (77). This coming together of immanent and transcendental dimensions defines *Phenomenology's Material Presence* as a “meditation” on the “experience of a world co-constituted by video and by [Hezekiah’s] presence as a viewer of it” (ibid.), making it a valuable contribution in the field of phenomenological studies.

From a postcolonial perspective, one cannot avoid noticing that the book lacks a proper introduction to Yao Ramesar and does not establish any relationship between his work and that of other Third-world filmmakers, such as his mentor Haile Gerima. Hezekiah says almost nothing about the scholar and director, even though his videos, focusing on Caribbean culture and folklore, have attained international popularity, especially since he collaborated with Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, directing “The Saddhu of Couva” and “The Coral”. The analytical chapters offer a satisfying description of the techniques employed in the chosen works, such as solarization, depixelation, desaturation and suspended animation. Unfortunately, they do not contextualize them and give no information as to

the occasions of the filming and the motivations behind Yao Ramesar's artistic choice of blending documentary and fiction. The details about the director and his position as a Caribbean artist are limited to the introduction and regard his theorizations in the field of aesthetics, to which he contributes with the technique of "Caribbeing".

Caribbeing is a cinematographic method devised by Yao Ramesar in the mid-1980's. It is characterized by the exclusive use of natural light, strong chromatic contrast, slow motion and a blend of still and moving images that, according to the film-maker, displace "colonial rationalist conventions" of looking. Hezekiah's insight into *Caribbeing* is that it "attempts to make visible a Caribbean reality submerged through centuries of colonialism, slavery and indenture" (3), but she does not go in depth with the implications of this approach, even though the bibliography reports some personal interviews with the author, which might have provided further information and analysis on the politics informing his aesthetics. Hezekiah indicates that Yao Ramesar may have developed the idea of *Caribbeing* in response to postcolonial issues of memory and representation. The stimulating suggestion that the scholar-director is moved by a desire to re-vision colonial history by offering a decentralized look on Caribbean reality is strengthened by Hezekiah's declaration that "[t]he formal techniques serve to dislodge audiences' sedimented viewing of the cultural object" (4-5). However, she does not recognize any political motivations in *Caribbeing*, and sticks to the strictly phenomenological implications of the filmmaking by investigating how Being appears in the obeah ritual filmed in *Mami Wata* (chapter 2) and in the Ganga Dashara celebrations recorded in *Journey to Ganga Mai* (chapter 3).

Issues of counter-representation and an interrogation of the bias of traditional ways of looking that occupy a prominent place in the work of other filmmakers such as Trin T. Minh-ha and Isaac Julien would be expected to follow. However, Hezekiah skirts them, arguing that Yao Ramesar holds a controversial position with respect to Third Cinema theory in that his work "does not seek to supplement, supplant or speak to a colonial archive. It does not explicitly address questions of identity and representation [and] is not located in northern 'host countries' where the conditions of diaspora and exile are often most keenly felt" (5). These considerations sound precipitous for a research rooted in postcolonial issues and would require further analysis, especially as they deal with a diasporic experience with which Yao Ramesar is familiar, considering his history of displacement from Ghana to Trinidad. However, the author admits to be unhappy with postcolonial theory, on the ground that its focus is on meaning and signification and that it bypasses the question of consciousness which is instead raised by theorists such as David MacDougall and Natalie Depraz, whose works inspire her research. Hezekiah seems to imply that postcolonial theory, as a form of academic writing, "imposes theorizing upon the moving image" (iii), whereas her aims are "to dwell with the experience of looking", holding on to "the moment of vision" (iii) in order to focus on the problems of manifestation and consciousness.

In her discussion discursive and textual analysis is discarded in favor of an experiential approach based in perception, subjectivity and presence. The author takes the image as a repository of presence, endowed with the potential to create newness. Hezekiah writes that the videos “exist as a call” (73), inviting the viewer to abandon pre-formed notions of Caribbeanness in order to gain a new perspective on perception and knowledge. She is especially interested in showing how they provide a means to foreground “the existence of a presence that is more than is given to us in appearance” (74). References to “becoming” are made and linked to what, following Husserl, the author describes as “the possibilities of the visual” (6). These are, in turn, related to the notion of “essence” that informs visibility, unfolding as “a field of possibilities” (45) that video-art captures and materializes. Implicated with this metaphysical background, video’s manifestation retains a bundle of unexploited potential whose concretion is, however, not addressed in the book.

In this analytic context then, the nature of presence is not entirely clarified and its relationship to a general notion of becoming remains vague. Is becoming to be regarded as what is left in the passage from immediate perception to representation? Is it to be associated with the a-subjective, eventual forces evoked in Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization?¹ What is its relationship to postcolonial politics, especially to the issue of identity? The focus on phenomenology excludes the possibility to address these questions, grounding the analysis in a strictly aestheticizing perspective. Hezekiah’s concern is, in fact, with appearances. She reports Yao Ramesar’s words defining *Caribbeing* as “an attempt to represent the supernatural essence of Caribbean existence beyond the realm of linear realism” (1), but does not really address the question of how realism emerged in the first place in colonial visual culture or how it can be counteracted. This lack of analytical background weighs on the exploration of the videos, which Hezekiah opposes to a tradition of looking that unfortunately her study does not cover. The absence of a theoretical overview on documentary technique, which represents a significant formal component of Yao Ramesar’s videos, adds to the impression of incompleteness that emerges from this part of the analysis.

Furthermore, much of the compelling emphasis that Hezekiah places on the body in the first part of the book is lost in the following chapters and conclusion. These focus entirely on how Yao Ramesar’s work “perform[s] its own philosophical inquiry into being and consciousness” (6). There is a definite preponderance of the transcendental element in the analysis that leaves many questions unanswered. The most pressing ones relate to how Hezekiah’s look as a female, independent scholar living and researching in Canada relates to the work of a Trinidadian film-director and how to account for her position and experience of the videos from a distance. Moreover, considering the importance she places on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, more space to investigate the direct involvement of her body in the encounter with the work of art could have been provided. Instead, by linking corporeal perception to the transcendental, Hezekiah presupposes “a subject willing to release its own intentions and to allow its being to serve as a medium for the

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

passage of being” (52). This approach neutralizes the sexual and cultural specificity of her analysis, exposing the fundamental problem of phenomenology as it is voiced by feminist theorists, namely the presumption of universality that underlines its intent to provide a theory of self-evident and absolute truth.