

# *A Review of H. Peter Steeves' Beautiful, Bright, and Blinding: Phenomenological Aesthetics and the Life of Art*

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*Beautiful, Bright, and Blinding:*

*Phenomenological Aesthetics and the Life of Art*

by H. Peter Steeves.

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## **Introduction**

Phenomenology and the arts have always had a special relationship with each other. In different ways, both domains explore human perception, consciousness, and knowing. The arts play with our perceptual capacities and taken-for-granted understandings – often challenging assumptions and provoking new ways of attending to the world. Phenomenology seeks to describe the structure of such experiences, how they arise and develop. And indeed, phenomenological accounts of visual art, music, performance, film, and literature (among other practices) have led to many important insights. Consider, for example, how Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945; 1948/1964) analyses of Cézanne's paintings played a decisive role in the development of his philosophy of perception. One might also think of the work of more recent writers, like Mark Johnson (2007), who explore how the aesthetic experiences associated with music, dance, and art are continuous with the kinds of primary embodied, affective, and empathic capacities that allow us to interact with and make sense of the world beginning at the earliest stages of life.

A central aspect of phenomenological aesthetics involves examining how the ways we construct meaning out of the experience of art are guided by our condition as situated, embodied, social beings who are aware of our own finite nature. In doing so, it considers how our engagements with the world often tend to be guided by engrained or 'sedimented' ways of perceiving and thinking that, over time, become 'naturalized' or taken-for-granted as the way things are in an 'objective' reality. However, it also explores the active roles we play in constituting our own experience, as well as how that experience necessarily involves interaction, negotiation, interpretation, conflict, and cooperation within social and cultural worlds. As such, the 'phenomenological attitude' asks us to identify, critique, and loosen sedimented attitudes; to experience the world from multiple perspectives, and thereby reveal previously undisclosed

possibilities for analysis, thought, and action. Because of this, phenomenology is very well-suited to examine the kinds of transformative experiences we have when encountering powerful performances and art objects of various kinds. But it can also help us see how aesthetic experiences emerge in other, more ‘everyday’ contexts. Importantly, phenomenology reveals that aesthetic experience is not simply something that happens to us. It is, also, something we do. It permeates all aspects of our lives and does so in a range of ways.

These themes are taken up by H. Peter Steeves in *Beautiful, Bright, and Blinding: Phenomenological Aesthetics and the Life of Art*. The book explores an impressive range of ideas and experiences and will be of interest to academics working in the fields of aesthetics, arts education, cultural and media studies, and the humanities more generally. However, it is written in such a clear and accessible style that any interested reader can enjoy and understand it without much difficulty. This is to say that although Steeves is an academic philosopher, this book is not strictly an academic work – it does not engage in lengthy discussions of the history of aesthetics, nor does it offer extended reviews or technical critiques of other analytical approaches. Rather, Steeves’ aim is to provide a general and (mostly) jargon-free introduction to phenomenological aesthetics and to show how it might be undertaken in various contexts. It is in applied aesthetics that this book makes an important contribution.

In the Introduction, Steeves situates his approach within the phenomenological tradition, showing how phenomenological aesthetics departs from traditional approaches that are based in a detached rationalist metaphysics associated with Enlightenment thinking. By contrast, Steeves explores aesthetics beginning with the kinds of direct experiences that characterize everyday life. In doing so, he seeks to reveal how life and art are “fundamentally intertwined” (p. 2). Among other things, this means that the topics for discussion are not limited to “bourgeois practices” or objects and artifacts associated with ‘high art’ – films by Disney and Haneke, hot dogs and zombies, Dante and Duchamp all get equal attention. Following this, Steeves outlines the phenomenological method he adopts in the book. Most notably, he introduces the analytic of presence and absence that emerged in the work of Husserl, and that has been developed in various ways by subsequent thinkers like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida. Briefly, this involves the insight that when we encounter an object, we perceive only one side of it but are usually aware that it is a complete entity we are conscious of. Steeves then goes on to develop this through an analysis of a hybrid painting-installation piece by the visual artist Matthew Girson. Here he does a wonderful job of showing how the play of presence and absence, perception and apperception, extends beyond the mere seeing of objects and into the historical, social, and cultural worlds that give them meaning. The chapters that follow develop these insights (and others) in various contexts. The resulting analyses are fascinating, sometimes hilarious, and occasionally disturbing. Without wishing to give anything away, I offer next a brief outline of each subsequent chapter.

Girson’s paintings are also the subject of Chapter 1, which explores the “act of looking.” Interestingly, Steeves does this by “approaching the question of seeing from its blind spot” (p. 10). Building on the insights developed in the introduction, he discusses the play of absence and presence involved with blindness, scotomas, and anamorphic hiddenness, and he explores the range of social and political dimensions involved in enacting meaningful experiences in our encounters with visual art. Chapter 2 considers the work of Arshile Gorky, who, in the tradition of Cézanne, offers a nuanced investigation of line and space. Steeves’ phenomenological analysis of both Gorky and Cézanne reveals the way a work of art can open a world for us to inhabit, and how such worlds are continuous in many ways with those we live through in

everyday life. Chapter 3 develops this last theme in the context of installation and conceptual art. This includes mention of four installation pieces created by Steeves himself. These works are very interesting, and I had hoped that Steeves might turn to give an account from the side of the artist-creator. Instead, their components are listed and a few photos are provided. This small disappointment aside, I found the chapter to be highly illuminating. Steeves considers how we necessarily bring our own modes of organization to bear on the ideas and objects we are confronted with in such situations. This, he argues, calls an ethical dimension into play, where both artist and audience share responsibility for how works of art are experienced and understood. The first section of the book ends with the summary statement:

In the end it is surely the case not only that the activity of thinking is itself a sort of conceptual art, as thinking organizes and remakes the world, but that the artist her- or himself helps us think, elucidating concepts, and demonstrating how our minds and the world with which they are engaged are a living aesthetic experience. (p.72)

This provides an appropriate transition to Section 2, which turns our attention towards cinematic phenomena. Chapter 4 opens with an exploration of the experience of identity and death in the films of Michael Haneke. Here again, ethical concerns are at the foreground as Steeves considers the staged and actual death of (respectively) human and non-human animals in cinematic contexts. In doing so, he exposes the deep play between the real and the fictional that gives cinematic art its power and meaning. Chapter 5 employs the phenomenological tools introduced in previous chapters towards a detailed analysis of the animated version of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Steeves offers a fast paced and highly engaging reading of the film that pulls back its clichéd veneer to reveal a tragic story of repressed homoerotic desire and the abandonment of authenticity. Chapter 6 concludes the section with an examination of our obsession with zombie films, raising some very interesting points on human consciousness, rationality, communication, nostalgia, and mourning – e.g., the phenomenon of presencing dead (i.e., absent) loved ones.

Section 3 focuses on animal aesthetics, taking themes found in Chapters 4 and 6 in new directions. In Chapter 7, Steeves offers a fascinating analysis of the aesthetics of eating. This involves an insightful and often highly-amusing first-person account of his love of fake meat products (e.g., veggie dogs), where he explores the ontological and ethical implications of consuming vegetarian food that is meant to mimic animal flesh. Chapter 8 introduces the powerful work of performance artist, Rachel Rosenthal, who often shares the stage with non-human animals – human, animal, performer, actor, art, and everyday life are thrown into dynamic juxtaposition with important ethical implications regarding the exploitative relationship between humans and animal ‘others.’ This chapter also involves a shift in style, from a more traditional descriptive analysis to an approach that is more explicitly postmodern. Here Steeves’ discussion is interspersed with what appear to be lines of dialogue and stage directions from Rosenthal’s performance. I must admit that I was slightly frustrated by this chapter – not having experienced the performance under discussion, I felt somewhat left out and the lengthy passages of the script came off as a bit too abstract and even a little indulgent at times. The inclusion of some images (as with other chapters) – or better, a video link<sup>1</sup> – might have mitigated this. Nevertheless, the core ethical concerns that emerge through Steeves’ engagement with

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/user/RachelRosenthalCo/videos>

Rosenthal's performances are articulated clearly, as is the insight that life itself (human or non-human) is a kind of performance.

The turn towards postmodernism and performance sets the stage for the final section of the book, *Laughing Beyond Modernity*. Chapter 9 provides a brilliant discussion of the "possibility of postmodern comedy" using *The Simpsons* as a paradigmatic example. Steeves draws detailed comparisons with traditionalist and modernist approaches to comedy, such as *I Love Lucy* and *Seinfeld*, respectively. He summarizes these by noting that where the traditionalist "is unaware (or unwilling to admit) his role in creating culture, the modernist attempts to mock culture by being above it and satirizing it" (p. 189). This stands in contrast to the kind of postmodernist humor one finds in *The Simpsons*. As Steeves explains:

*The Simpsons* [...] acknowledges what it is and how it is situated in the world. It exposes the artifice that holds it up. It admits its complicity in late capitalism. And it gives us reason to smile that does not simultaneously demand bad faith, demand that we ignore the complexities of the world (as the traditionalist would have us do) or imagine that we can rise above those complexities (as the modernist imagines we can). By making local products and local culture in Springfield into the assumed mass culture of the world, *The Simpsons* concedes the relation between the two but forces us to think about that relation in a new way. It does not stand outside of that relation, but twists it from within. It is hard to do such topological maneuvers when one is immersed in the medium being contorted, but it is the only authentic stance to take in a postmodern world. (p.186)

This insight is unpacked through a range of examples drawn from episodes where the show plays with language, communication, politics, history, memory, consumer culture, and more. While this chapter does not involve an obvious connection to phenomenology as such, it nevertheless advances the theme of life-art continuity that drives Steeves' project – especially when it highlights the way *The Simpsons* implicates itself (and us) in the very world it critiques. In this way, the chapter does maintain (if tacitly) the connection between art and phenomenology touched on previously when it demonstrates how postmodern comedy can foreground aspects of contemporary cultural experience that are often taken for granted. In all, this is an excellent chapter – and one that could be recommended to anyone wanting to better understand the meaning and implications of the term 'postmodern.'

The concluding chapter explores the work of the late comedian/performance artist, Andy Kaufmann. Here, Steeves returns to the more explicitly phenomenological approach that characterizes the earlier chapters of the book. In doing so, he shows how Kaufmann plays with our expectations (our 'sedimented' attitudes) – and often in highly uncomfortable ways – allowing us to see how our experience of humour is often dependent on certain social and temporal structures that we often take for granted. Indeed, Kaufmann pulls these structures apart, isolating and manipulating them. By exploring the ways Kaufmann does this, and the experiences this evokes, Steeves develops a rich account of the structure of joke telling and comedy more generally. He also considers how comedy and tragedy, life and death, are deeply intertwined – an insight that is reflected in the life story of Kaufmann himself. In line with this, the chapter concludes with a fascinating discussion of Kaufmann's theatrical piece, *God*, which is analyzed as a kind of inversion of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

While Steeves' book is enjoyable and often highly illuminating, some readers may find it to be lacking in certain areas. For one thing, Steeves' discussion of other contributions in phenomenological aesthetics is arguably underdeveloped, especially with regard to current scholarship. Indeed, there are many authors doing similar work in the areas of cinema, music, visual art, dance, embodiment, and everyday life (e.g., Johnson, 2007; Sepp & Embree, 2010; Schusterman, 2012). This does afford a more accessible discussion, but it may leave readers experienced in phenomenology with the impression that the book is not as well situated within the field as it could be. In line with this, a number of important relevant concepts are not discussed. For example, while Steeves puts the ideas of Sartre, Baudrillard, and Deleuze to good use – and does a fine job of explaining (and demonstrating) the analytic of presence and absence – I was somewhat surprised to see no mention of the notions of 'background' and 'focal' practices as developed respectively by Dreyfus (see Dreyfus, 2017) and Borgmann (1984). Nor, for that matter, is there any discussion of the Heideggerian view of art as "the shining of truth" (1960/1993b) – a concept that the title of the book appears to reference. These concepts – and those of other primary thinkers in phenomenological aesthetics such as Gadamer (1986, 1989), Ingarden (1985), Berleant (1970, 1991), and Dufrenne (1973) – could have offered a good deal of support to some of Steeves' analyses, especially towards developing the important theme of life-art continuity. Moreover, while the early chapters of the book tend to build on the phenomenological insights of the previous ones, the later ones move off in their own directions and sometimes the connection to phenomenology becomes tenuous. Because of this, the book reads more like a collection of essays organized according to the general themes of each section, rather than as a sustained phenomenological analysis. With this in mind, it is possible that a brief consideration of Heidegger's (1954/1993a) critique of technology, as well as Borgmann's (1992) idea of the "postmodern divide" might have helped keep the analysis of consumption and the discussion of postmodernism more phenomenologically focused. Likewise, a discussion of Derrida's (2008) foundational writings in Animal Studies – and other related accounts (e.g., Haraway, 2008; Ryan, 2015; Menely, 2015) – could have provided both precedent and interesting counterpoints to many of Steeves' insights in the chapters concerning eating and animals.

While Steeves might not engage as comprehensively with scholarship in the field as some readers might like, he nevertheless does an excellent job of showing how a general phenomenological orientation – as well as number of key concepts – can be developed across a range of areas. In doing so, he provides rich, coherent, and thought provoking analyses of the deep continuity between art and life. He explores complex ideas and experiences in a highly readable way, examining them from multiple perspectives and engaging the reader's imaginative and critical capacities. *Beautiful, Bright, and Blinding* will certainly merit multiple readings and provoke discussion. It will provide an accessible introduction to applied phenomenological aesthetics for lay readers. It will also offer useful practical and ethical insights for scholars and students, especially when read in conjunction with other primary texts in phenomenological aesthetics. Recommended.

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