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Dialogues: Dylan Trigg

communication +1

communicationplusone@gmail.com



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Q: First, I want to say thanks for agreeing to this interview - I feel that scholars in other fields have a lot to glean from phenomenology, particularly with regards to the sort of domains your work covers. To date you've written several monographs, including a *phenomenology of the uncanny*¹, *horror*², and *anxiety*³. How would you describe the common theme of your work?

DT: Thank you kindly for these questions, which have been interesting to reflect on. I think there are several themes that run through my work—aesthetics, nostalgia, anxiety, uncanniness, memory, horror, home, embodiment— but perhaps one theme that unifies them all is a concern with the ways impersonal and anonymous processes exact a disruptive influence on the lived experience of the present.

In *The Aesthetics of Decay*⁴, which I wrote as a graduate student before my PhD, I was very much concerned with the way processes of ruin and decay challenge the notion of rational progress, and more specifically with how the figure of decay—as an architectural, organic, and aesthetic form—indexes an excess that is irreducible to the framework of identity, be it personal, collective, or spatial. One of the other trajectories that emerged from this book was an interest in the affective quality of built structures, and, more specifically, how built structures latently embody aesthetic and historic ideas.

This idea of built structures as being exemplars of aesthetic and historic notions was also pursued in my next book, *The Memory of Place*. Only here, my concern moved away from charting decay and fragmentation in a general sense and moved more toward the fabric of everyday life as it is uprooted by a series of experiences that cannot be fully consolidated in space and time. Most obviously, this can refer to traumatic memory, but this displacement is also evident in more ambiguous phenomena, such as the nostalgic attachment to airports, the anxious experience of one's home at night, and the uncanny quality of feeling haunted. I was also very interested in this book, as I continue to be, in how the human body can become the

¹ Trigg, Dylan, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* Ohio University Press, 2013.

² Trigg, Dylan, *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror*. Zero Books, 2014.

³ Trigg, Dylan. *Topophobia: A Phenomenology of Anxiety* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

⁴ Trigg, Dylan. *The Aesthetics of Decay*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

host for an anonymous experience that undermines the notion of selfhood as rational and sovereign.

This idea of the body as impersonal became the theme of my next two books, *The Thing* and *Topophobia*, the former dealing with bodily horror of a time and materiality outside of experience, and the latter contending with the lived experience of spatial anxieties. In each case, the concern is not only with the production of a body that appears for us as foreign and alien but also with how phenomenology as a philosophical methodology committed to a descriptive account of lived experience of the body as *one's own* can approach a body that is precisely *not one's own*.

The common theme is not simply with disruptive forces and that alone, but rather with how everyday experience in its familiarity and banality is constituted by a series of less familiar structures, whether it be subjective, intersubjective, spatial, temporal or otherwise, and then exploring the affective relations to those structures. Anxiety, for example, presents us with an especially striking illustration of an affective force that is experienced as hostile and impersonal precisely within the context of an everyday experience that is familiar and personalised. Whether we think that anxiety is a contingent departure from familiar experience or a disclosure of its illusory nature generates not only a very different understanding of anxiety, but also of the nature of identity itself. The same is no less true of nostalgia in its joint attention on presence and absence, past and present, and home and homesickness, and it is in this encounter between two or more divergent forces colliding in the same space that a lot of my work tends to gravitate toward.

Q: *There is a concern for the non-human or the “un-human” as you put it in much of your writing. As you wrote,*

“...just because there is a human with an affective experience does not mean that we are bound by the limits of human finitude. Rather, it is precisely because the human remains intact that the thinking of the unhuman becomes possible. A critical thesis can be formulated: Only in the disjunction between the experience of oneself as human and the realization that this

same entity is fundamentally beyond humanity is the possibility of an unhuman phenomenology conceivable.” (Trigg 2013b)⁵

Here you are commenting on the “weird realism” of materiality beyond human experience, and how that continuously haunts us yet provides a way to allow things to speak for themselves. Can you elaborate on this?

DT: The motivation for my idea of an “unhuman phenomenology,” which I discuss in *The Thing*, is to develop a phenomenology that is capable of attending to phenomena that is nonhuman. This aim is situated against two contexts. The first (minor) context is that of speculative realism’s engagement with phenomenology, and more specifically, with a series of critiques directed at the limits of phenomenology, which seemed to me at the time merited a reply. But the more substantial context is the status of phenomenology on its own terms. Phenomenology has conventionally been committed to describing what it is like to have a given experience from the perspective of how it is *for us* to have this experience. In this respect, phenomenology is humanistic in the sense that its research findings tend to reinforce and reinstate a certain notion of human experience as unified and integrated. Its account of subjectivity and intersubjectivity is felicitous in outlook, and it arguably privileges an account of human experience marked by a gesture of incorporation and synthesis (to think here of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the intentional arc, for example). This is also true of phenomenology’s rich contribution to psychopathological disorders. What is valuable about this research is the attention phenomenology gives to the contextual, embodied, and relational structure of affective states rather than treating affective disorders as localised to cognitive processes.

In all this, phenomenology aims broadly at the restoration of a certain kind of human world with a tacit normative and ethical structure. The point of departure for an unhuman phenomenology is not to deny the ethical status of the human experience much less to counter this tradition of phenomenology with a variant of nihilism, which is very remote to me. Rather, in my notion of an unhuman

⁵ Trigg, Dylan. “The Horror of Darkness: Toward an Unhuman Phenomenology.” *Speculations a Journal of Speculative Realism*, no. 4. (2013): 113–121.

phenomenology, I am committed to retaining phenomenology's rich heritage for investigating affective experience, but at the same time I propose to do away with the idea of the body as irreducibly *human*. Just because there is a body to which one feels an attachment does not, it seem to me, guarantee its status as human. After all, there is much about the human body—and about the material world more broadly—that is resistant to our attempts toward anthropomorphism.

This is why I take body horror to be an emblematic experience of the limits of human identity, because it amplifies the point at which the body rejects the identity and value conferred upon it. David Cronenberg puts the point well in asking “How does the disease perceive us?” What interests me in this respect is precisely retaining the validity of lived experience in order to chart the felt experience of the body as dissenting from this pre-given and habitual sense of being *one's own*. In this respect, the language of the inhuman and post-human does not capture what is at stake for me. Both terms neglect the starting point of philosophical reflection—subjective experience. At the same time, a phenomenology that retains human experience does so not as an endpoint, but as a departure, and it is from this departure where the human and the inhuman come into contact with one another, with each aspect co-inhabiting the same body, that an unhuman phenomenology begins. It is for this reason that the term unhuman not only avoids the pitfalls of the posthuman and the inhuman, but it also underscores the un-canny aspect of the body as the most familiar and unfamiliar of places.

Q: The last question also speaks to your examination of the importance of intercorporeality over the question of intersubjectivity. In writing a phenomenology of agoraphobia, you note the preponderance of others, not just the faceless crowds but the desire for the “presence” of home, the motions of a bus and the importance of various landmarks as a reassuring destination draws closer.:

“Our experience of ourselves is affected by our experience of others precisely because we are in a bodily relation with others. Such a relation is not causally linked, as though first there were a body, then the other person, and then a subject that provided a thematic and affective context to that

experience. Instead, body, other, and self are each intertwined in a single unity and cannot be considered apart.” (Trigg, 2013c)

This argument also reveals the importance of sensing to the pre-personal body. You point out that Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on intersubjectivity say that “communication with others is provided by the structure of bodily subjectivity, which necessarily puts us in touch with others” but in this account, “our relations with others serves to define and shape our experience of the self.” How can we understand the pre-personal, and do others constantly mediate our experience of that?

DT: In *Topophobia*, I attempt to provide a phenomenological analysis of spatial phobias, partly drawn from my own previous experience of agoraphobia but also from clinical and literary case studies. The idea of the prepersonal body is vital to this in a number of respects, but to put this in context, let me say a word about what the prepersonal body refers to. I take the concept from Merleau-Ponty. As Merleau-Ponty sees it, beyond the level of our own perceptual experience, there is another level of intentionality at work, which allows us to get situated in the world prior to theoretical or abstract reflection. This prepersonal level of existence not only plays a key role in allowing me to get spatially directed, it also serves to consolidate my temporal experience into a unifying arc. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty elaborates on cases such as that of the phantom limb. Far from severing my contact with the world, the production of a phantom limb instead serves to merge sedimented and habitual layers of experience into a future that is radically divergent from that of my past. The same is true of my relation with other people. To form a liaison with another person is not to understand their motives and states of mind in abstraction. Instead, I understand the expressive gestures of other people in a pre-reflective way. As Merleau-Ponty says, to understand anger, it is not necessary to make a series of deductive propositions; rather, anger is grasped from the outset as a set of bodily gestures that aligns with the infrastructure of my own dynamic and affective relation to the world.

The point of all this is to underscore how much of bodily existence takes place to some extent “independently” of our own volitional intervention. Merleau-Ponty is very charitable I think in terms of his faith in human existence to tolerate the

ambiguities that each of us must contend with, but disorders such as agoraphobia paint a different picture from the one that characterises his account of intercorporeality. Intercorporeality here simply refers to the way in which my body is intertwined with other people, irrespective of “my” own perspective on the matter. Consider what it is to be in a public space. At all times, my experience of space is mediated by the presence and absence of other people. On public transport, we feel uneasy if someone stands too close to us or gazes too long at us. Conversely, when we want to express warmth to another person, we tend to be very tactile with them.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality can play a key role here in helping to understand how disorders such as agoraphobia are not simply tied up with spatial factors, but instead involve a much richer set of dimensions. The problem for the agoraphobic person is that irrespective of their own preferences, as bodily subjects, we are already in contact with other people from the outset. This is problematic for several reasons. First, this prepersonal level of bodily existence situates us in a corporeal and interspatial world. The world is never ours and ours alone, as we experience it from an egocentric perspective, but instead emerges as a shared world. Why is this problematic? Because other people’s bodies affect us both as discernible things in the world, but also in terms of how we experience our own bodies. For an agoraphobic person striving to keep their anxiety under control this is a difficulty, insofar as the body expresses a series of symptoms and gestures over which I have limited control.

The concept of the prepersonal body also raises a series of questions over who the subject of perception is. As Merleau-Ponty says time and again, to speak accurately of perception, we ought to say that *one* perceives rather than *I* perceive. We are, if you will, subjected to a set of bodily processes and structures that are much older than the personalised “I” that adopts those structures. Of course, for the most part, our relation to the anonymity of the body is benevolent: we simply let it go about its everyday functioning in the world. But the very sense of describing the body as an “it” in this sense is telling, and in moments of illness, disease, and alienation the thinglike [sic] quality of the body becomes more prevalent. In agoraphobic anxiety, there may well be a complete fracture of bodily integration, such that the anonymity of the body is experienced as a threat to the stability of selfhood. After all, when a

human being is unable to cross a pedestrian bridge or enter a supermarket without great difficulty, then they are likely to experience the body as an obstacle to their goal. This is not a concession to Cartesian dualism, but instead an acknowledgment that in certain affective moments, we can experience the body as *other*. In part, then, by looking at the prepersonal way in which affective disorders are organised, we can gain a much clearer and richer picture of the complexity of certain pathological disorders, a complexity that is not only evident in thematic experience, but also in a series of implicit and often hidden structures.

Q: You mentioned David Cronenberg earlier, *who's work you've also written about*. (Trigg, 2011)⁶ Cronenberg is often a source of inspiration for communication scholars, particularly with his body-horror perversions of McLuhanesque media studies. In a way, he points to intercorporeality in very gruesome ways – whether this is the merging of minds in “Scanners,” the sexual fusion of bodies and automobiles in “Crash” or various mediating entities in “Videodrome” (including guns, televisions, broadcast signals, and VHS tapes with the mind and body). Does Cronenberg’s horror resonate with your attempt to look beyond human subjectivity?

DT: From the outset, film has been important to me not just as a way of illustrating already existing philosophical ideas, but as a way of taking the medium seriously as a method of interrogation on its own terms. Here, we could think of Werner Herzog and his Minnesota Declaration together with its adjoining notion of the Ecstatic Truth. Likewise, we could think of David Lynch and his treatment of fugue like states, or we could think of Roman Polanski and his attention to the fragmentation of identity in relationship to spatial circumstances. David Cronenberg is also working here with a set of themes, and revealing aspects of bodily experience that are illuminated in a specific way through film.

Cronenberg himself has said on a number of occasions that he’s a “card carrying existentialist” and this is true. He begins from the perspective that we have a freedom to define and redefine ourselves, corporeally and technologically. Many of his earlier films are affirmations of the transformative potential of the body. *The*

⁶ Trigg, Dylan, “The Return of the New Flesh: Body Memory in David Cronenberg and Merleau-Ponty.” *Film-Philosophy*, 15 no. 1, (2011): 82-99.

Brood, *Scanners*, *Videodrome* are all in one way or another depictions of the body as progressing through the intervention of technology. In his mid to late '80s films, there's a shift from this almost Nietzschean vision of the body to something more existentially angst ridden. As an example, *The Fly* is an incisive study of the body as a locus of potential to the body as site of dissent and betrayal. The same is also true of his account of human relations (to think here of *Dead Ringers*), each of which is told through the lens of the decaying or disintegrating body. What is interesting, then, is not so much Cronenberg's variant of Sartrean existentialism, but the point at which this existentialism is no longer tenable, such that the indeterminacy of the body assumes an autonomous life of its own. This, for me, is when his films really come to life. What appeals to me about this vision is a sort of "ontological amplification"—to use an expression of Bachelard—of several themes that are already latent in phenomenological research; bodily ownership, agency, the relation between the body and technology, and so forth. Body horror, far from merely aiming at a visceral shock, becomes the means of formulating a series of problems that are not peculiar to the genre but also have relevance for understanding how identity is shaped by the body more generally (and for this reason David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* is as much an example of body horror as Cronenberg's *The Fly* is).

In film, we also gain a sense of how certain implicit and cultural understandings of the body is understood as an evolving concept. Much of this need not be prescribed by the director explicitly; John Carpenter is well-known for his rejection of "intellectualist" interpretations of his works, as is Werner Herzog. But this does nothing to discredit how cinematic works ranging from Tarkovsky to obscure b-movies each absorb and in turn manifest a set of sedimented presuppositions about embodiment, identity, and the surrounding world, which merit investigation irrespective of their objective value as aesthetic objects.

Q: *You've expressed an interest in returning to some of the concerns that maybe relate to your earlier work in The Aesthetics of Decay. What are your thoughts on the current nostalgia over retro-culture, such as vaporwave, chiptunes, 80s aesthetics, and these celebrations of what is maybe "techno-kitsch"?*

DT: I've been trying to wean myself off nostalgia for far too long. In one way or another, each of the books I've written, I was under the impression I would be putting the issue to rest. Evidently this is a failure as the book I'm currently working on is again on the topic of nostalgia at an even more explicit level. In *The Aesthetics of Decay*, I was committed to dismantling the idea of an ironic conception of nostalgia as an extension of post-modernism. This led to a romanticised affirmation of the process of decay and a phenomenological and aesthetic veneration of urban ruins as a manifestation of this stance. After that book, I returned to nostalgia in *The Memory of Place*, this time at a more lived and first-person level. Even in *Topophobia*, which is ostensibly a book on agoraphobia, the underlying concern is the pathological cultivation of a semi-factual, semi-mythical home as a supposed rejoinder to the problem of anxiety.

The next book will consolidate these themes through considering the nostalgia for the 1980s, and especially for artefacts and traces of that time that haunt the present. This interest is set against two contexts. The first is that of the present cultural revival of '80s aesthetics, which is a movement I'm not entirely unsympathetic to. In this context, we see now a very specific kind of nostalgia that is less concerned with a glorious past, and more with the transformation of a past, the appeal of which lies precisely in its banality and innocence. Here, I am thinking of the hypnagogic atmosphere that surrounds the nostalgia for malls, Muzak, food courts, corporate training videos, infomercials, Patrick Nagel prints, Memphis Milano furniture, slap bass, smooth jazz, cavernous reverb, pastel and neon, chrome and steel, aerobics and nautilus themed interior design, Memorex and VHS, and the sound of the Rockman guitar processor.

The second context is that of the status of nostalgia itself, not only in political and psychological terms, but also conceptually. In addition to its aesthetic revival, there's also been a surge of interest in nostalgia from an empirical and psychological perspective. Much of this research venerates nostalgia as a self-help resource that enables us to lead more meaningful lives. To my mind, much of this research presents a highly circumscribed version of nostalgia, which tends to treat the mood as a state of mind we have volitional access to and can then apply as and when needed. Part of the motivation for such a formulation of nostalgia seems to be a

desire to establish a distance from homesickness, and in the process accent the motif of *nostos* (homecoming) and underplay the *algos* (suffering). In a word, although nostalgia is very much in vogue, this coverage has not led to a deepening of the mood, but precisely to its trivialization. Phenomenology may well play a critical role here in clarifying the invariant structures of nostalgia, its historic and conceptual relation to home and homesickness, and its affective structure as involving not only continuity and warmth, but also absence and melancholia.

As to the current wave of nostalgia revival—including, vaporwave, synthwave, mallwave—there's a lot to say here from a hauntological perspective on the “post-nostalgic” inheritance of late '80s/early '90s culture by a generation born after the twilight of the '80s. Under what circumstances does the banality of a past become an object of nostalgia? There are a number of things going on. The first is a relatively straightforward, uncritical, and largely non-ironic love for the past of one's childhood. This would be the case of synthwave, which seems to me a fairly innocuous form of nostalgia. Vaporwave is slightly different from this, as it involves a political and ironical element lacking in synthwave. If vaporwave and synthwave derive from the same atmosphere of time, then in the case of vaporwave, nostalgia is employed less to service one's adult existence and more to underscore the scattered inheritance of a time that never came to fruition. In this sense, the idea is not novel, and the notion of a deferred ending which reconsolidates itself without limits can be found as much in the work of James Leyland Kirby as it can in the symphonies of Valentin Silvestrov. The basic idea in each case is that the coda marks the beginning of a new life rather than its termination. Mallwave—ambient mall music sourced from the early to mid '90s—is an interesting case in point here. It fits neither into the innocuous synthwave nostalgia but nor is it political in motivation in the way that vaporwave is. Rather, its concern is with the protraction of time as an aesthetic and affective phenomenon. There is much to say here on the relation between nostalgia and boredom, given that both moods are stipulated on the lassitude of time and nothing is ostensibly more boring than the time of a homogenous shopping mall. And this is precisely its appeal; it is a place in which time is slowed down and fortified against a present that is marked by uneven edges and uncertainty.

The book I'm working on is rather removed from a political analysis, and concerned less with the production of nostalgia as a critique of capitalism, ironic or otherwise, and more with the experiential dimensions of what it is like to be stranded from an atmosphere of time, to which one feels a strong identification with. For this reason, I am very taken with a "chronophobic" dimension of nostalgia, nostalgia as a mode of contending with the impersonal and anonymous substructures underpinning perceptual experience, not least those that put time out of joint. What interests me now is not the aftermath of ruins, but instead the deferment of ruination through the manipulation of time. Here, nostalgia and topophobia come into the same lens. They both serve as ways of personalising a level of impersonal existence that threatens to ruin the narrative we tell ourselves about who we are and what the world is like. In the case of agoraphobia, this threat takes shape primarily in a spatial sense, whereas in nostalgia, the affective register is temporal in its roots though expressed in a plurality of ways.

Q: Media archaeology has a lot of concerns with the non-human and the cultural logics that follow from materiality. In this way it shares many concerns with new materialities and the work of speculative realists. How can media scholars be more phenomenological in their work when thinking past the histories of things and how they participate in lived experience?

DT: Phenomenology has generally been rather myopic in terms of its attention to the histories of things, so I think phenomenology might have more to learn from media scholars. More constructively, the term archaeology has a rich history in phenomenology, which aligns closely with the work of media archaeology. Indeed, Husserl himself was said to have preferred the term archaeology for his research were it not already taken over by the positivistic sciences. What does archaeology mean in a phenomenological sense? It means attending to the ways lived and perceptual experience is structured by a set of sedimented meanings embedded in experience. In this respect, archaeology is used in Merleau-Ponty as a middle ground between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, and more specifically, with the ways meaning and sense come to assume their importance.. This is consistent with the movement of phenomenology more generally; it is genetic in scope, interrogating not simply the thematic presentation of experience, but also the gendered, political, and social elements that constitute lived experience. This mode of phenomenology

has been formulated as a critical phenomenology, evidenced by people like Lisa Guenther, Sarah Ahmed, and Alia Al-Saji, each of whom have expanded phenomenology beyond the framework of a consciousness that is transparent to itself. For media scholars engaging with this literature, there is a lot to learn about the situated quality of lived experience, its sedimented meanings, and the manner in which lived experience is structured in relation to institutions and political systems.

Bio:

Dylan Trigg is FWF Lise Meitner Fellow (senior) at the University of Vienna, Department of Philosophy. He has previously held research and teaching positions at the University of Memphis, University College Dublin, and Les Archives Husserl, École Normale Supérieure. He works on phenomenology and existentialism; philosophies of subjectivity and embodiment; aesthetics and philosophies of art; and philosophies of space and place. Trigg is the author of several books.

This interview was conducted by Nathanael Bassett with Dylan Trigg between February 19th – April 15th, 2018
