



Critical Phenomenology: An Introduction

by Elisa Magrì & Paddy McQueen, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2022, 240 pp., €62.20 (hardback), ISBN: 9781509541119, €21.90 (paperback), ISBN: 9781509541126

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BOOK REVIEW

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Fans of arthouse cinema may lament that über-indie idol Greta Gerwig sold out to mainstream cinema with her foray into *Barbie*. Yet for every film snob who refuses to watch *Barbie*, innumerable others have discovered Gerwig's *oeuvre* precisely because of her heady entry into Hollywood stardom. Similarly, for every phenomenologist expressing suspicion and disregard toward "critical phenomenology" for its shift away from transcendental concerns, its inescapable currency has led a whole swathe of thinkers to discover the theoretical import of phenomenological analysis. Both the popularity and suspicion the sudden prefix 'critical' has provoked is in no small part due to the ambiguity as to *what critical phenomenology is*. *Critical Phenomenology: An Introduction* attempts to resolve this ambiguity. Elisa Magrì and Paddy McQueen introduce the reader to the broad history, concepts, methods, and guiding themes of this newly instituted sub-field, as well as delving deeper into what distinguishes critical from classical phenomenology.

The book is divided into six chapters. For readers familiar with the phenomenological tradition, the first chapter, "What is *Critical Phenomenology*?", is perhaps most interesting as it carefully responds to the question of what makes critical phenomenology distinct from so-called 'classical' phenomenology. Magrì and McQueen sketch the state of the art and critically engage with Lisa Guenther's earliest attempts at setting critical phenomenology apart from its transcendental origins (19–21). They instead argue that "contemporary critical phenomenology necessarily integrates various aspects of transcendental analysis" (20), such that one must concede that there is an "impossibility of neatly distinguishing classics of phenomenology and existentialism from critical phenomenology" (23). Although critical phenomenology has certainly enriched and expanded the scope of phenomenological analysis, it relies on many of the same concepts and arguments as found throughout classical phenomenology and transcendental analysis.

The second chapter, "Corporeality" explores three dimensions of embodiment, namely, "bodily awareness, the body seen by others, and the habitual body" (48). The chapter covers ground from Husserl's transcendental-phenomenological account of the *Leib* up until contemporary phenomenological accounts of illness, particularly as found in the works of Havi Carel and Matthew Ratcliffe. Whilst providing a succinct and accessible overview of the importance of corporeality in phenomenology, these discussions are consistently interspersed with critical insights, such as Elizabeth Behnke's discussion of somatology and kinaesthetic responsibility (52–53), Luna Dolezal's work on Sartrean shame and social stigma (59–60), Shannon Sullivan's account of cultural misinterpretation (66–67), and Helen Ngo's work on racial habits (67–68).

The third chapter, "Intersubjectivity", expands the discussion of embodiment into the realm of interpersonal experience. Here, what Magrì and McQueen take to be distinct within critical phenomenology is the foregrounding of how "we *learn* to see and recognise others within *and against* the socio-cultural world we inhabit" (85), and how this "radicalizes" (95) classical phenomenological analyses of interpersonal life. We find that critical phenomenology has not radicalised the methods of classical phenomenology, rather, there is a radical

difference of *interest* as intersubjectivity is discussed within the realm of the contingent and empirical rather than the universal and transcendental.

At this point, the book shifts to two sites at which corporeality, interpersonal experience, and power relations most visibly intersect, namely, the ‘visible identities’ (9) of gender and race. Chapter four introduces the reader to phenomenology’s longstanding engagement with questions of sexuality, gendered experiences, and the problem of gender oppression (121). Central to this discussion is how critical phenomenology aims to distance itself from classical phenomenology’s tendency to “either disregard or woefully misrepresent the phenomenology of sexual difference and gender” (130), and the typically “implicit universalisation of the male, white, and straight body” (127). Building on these self-reflective critiques with insights from post-structuralism, we are shown how critical phenomenologists arrive at fertile ground for an account of gendered (inter)subjectivity.

Chapter five then turns to a critical phenomenology of race. Like gender, Magri and McQueen state that a phenomenology of race must emphasise both its existential significance and its relation to empirical (rather than transcendental) subjectivity. Whereas classical phenomenology has the tendency to speak of selfhood and subjectivity in universal and transcendental terms, critical phenomenology foregrounds the empirical contingencies of how selfhood is embodied, expressed, and comes into relation with other selves. Magri and McQueen always take care not to pit critical and classical phenomenological approaches against each other. In their discussion of Frantz Fanon, they inform the reader that even for a critical phenomenological discussion of the racialised self, a minimal-experiential self is preserved as one “does not lose one’s distinctive sense of mineness” (169). To many, such a comment may present itself as unimportant, but it exemplifies the attentive diplomacy of this book; that critical phenomenological discussions of social-, racialised-, or multiplicitous-selves can (and must) be read in complementarity with classical phenomenology. Critical phenomenology is not incompatible with questions of experiential minimalism, but rather as Magri and McQueen demonstrate, its theoretical interests lie elsewhere. Whilst classical phenomenology takes interest in essential, universal, and invariant structures of experience, critical phenomenology explicitly deals with the empirical variations of experiential life which result from oppressive paradigms of power.

In the final chapter, Magri and McQueen bring to bear the insights of the previous four chapters onto “political issues and social concerns, such as precariousness and solidarity” (189). The most interesting sections are perhaps 6.5.2 and 6.5.3 (pp. 219–226), where they discuss what a phenomenological account of precariousness and vulnerability looks like, followed by – in line with this special issue – the importance of “bodies on the street” (223) for cultivating solidarity.

As a painstakingly detailed introduction, Magri and McQueen’s book is an invaluable resource for students first coming to phenomenology, those wanting to explore new, more political avenues of phenomenological research, and researchers who wish to gain a somewhat clearer understanding of the ways critical phenomenology converges and diverges from its wider tradition. Regardless of whether you consider it to be methodologically novel or merely a catchy label, Magri and McQueen demonstrate how critical phenomenology has enriched the relevance of phenomenological analysis for discussions found within and beyond wider philosophical discussions. This book showcases the expansiveness and theoretical import of a field of research which has undoubtedly justified its place on many a philosophical syllabus.

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