

UC Irvine

2016 Conference Proceedings

Title

Phenomenology in Practice: Implications for the Art and Craft of Fiction, Abstract

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8tq236vs>

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Publication Date

2018-01-08

Peer reviewed

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Phenomenology in Practice: Implications for the Art and Craft of Fiction

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What can phenomenology teach us about the art and craft of fiction? Why and how does one write? Drawing primarily from the preface of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's seminal work, "The Phenomenology of Perception," this paper explores a phenomenological theory of the art and craft of writing. Beginning from the dissolution of the Cartesian mind-body split, I argue that the imaginative act of writing can no longer be thought of as a translation or reification of a mental image, but must instead be conceived of as the means by which one creates the world and establishes the truth of one's consciousness, or one's being-in-the-world. Yet, as writing is not equivalent to perception, the art of writing must be distinguished from its craft. If the act of perception is always already begun, our understanding of our relation to the world is not; the work of description is an infinite task and cannot be completed so long as we are in the world. This is the responsibility of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty contends, to invite us to take notice of our relation to the world. I argue in similar fashion that a successfully crafted work of writing inserts a space between its reader and the world and by doing so awakens the reader to his or her own thoughts. Writing thus stands to suspend the movement of our being-in-the-world, to loosen "the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear." As the attempt to provide a direct description of embodied experience, to "[rediscover] that actual presence of myself to myself," phenomenology may bridge the divide between philosophy and art and above all give writers new ways to imagine the purpose and execution of their work.