

The World at a Glance

Edward Casey

by David Kleinberg-Levin

*Hyperion*, Volume IV, issue 1, April 2009

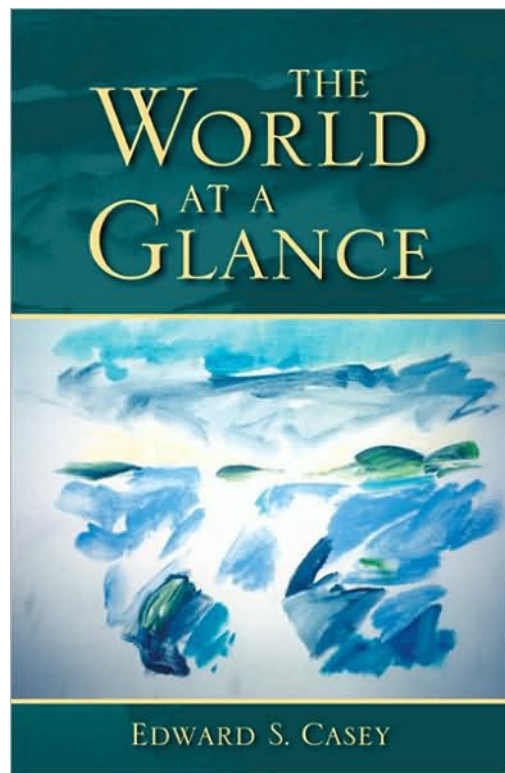
# HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



a review of  
**The World at a Glance**  
Edward Casey  
Indiana University Press, 2007

by David Kleinberg-Levin



I want to say right now, at the outset, that this is a work of extraordinary originality, a truly unique example of the practice of phenomenology. There is nothing like it—except the earlier books by the same author, always approaching his subject matter in the most rigorous phenomenological way.

But, before I discuss the contents of the book, I need to address the limitations confronting this review: limitations bordering on the impossible. For besides the problem of summarizing in a review such as this a book of such sheer length and comprehensiveness, there is also a problem that stems specifically from the great virtue of this book, namely, its absolutely uncompromising phenomenological fidelity to the things themselves just as they show themselves. What I mean is that it is impossible to summarize a work that truly, methodically practices phenomenology, because what is distinctive of this method, this practice, in contrast to other philosophical methods and practices, is precisely its rigorous attentiveness, its careful description of our experience as we actually live it. Whence its peculiar concreteness, its specificity, its micrological exactitude, its obsession with the detail. Instead of abstractions, generalities, and theoretically grounded analysis and argumentation, phenomenology is supposed to remain close to the experience in all its concrete richness, dimensionality, and subtlety. Phenomenology requires, therefore, an extraordinary patience, so that the phenomenon in question can unfold, can show itself, as Heidegger puts it without fully realizing the implications of his radical reformulation of Husserl's

conception of the methodology, “from out of itself.” This arduous patience, extremely difficult, extremely rare, is a quality that all of Edward Casey’s books exhibit to an incomparable degree. I can think of no one else writing today whose contributions to the phenomenological project inaugurated by Husserl so beautifully, so creatively, so perfectly carry forward the practice and its principles, showing how fruitful the project can be once its idealism, its metaphysics, no longer dictate the recovery of experience.

If phenomenology is to be rigorously descriptive, as the method requires, Casey’s writings give us descriptions with unequalled nuance, subtlety, richness of detail, and comprehensiveness. And precisely therein lies the problem for a reviewer—for me, at any rate—who must of course leave behind all this wonderfully rich texture. It is as impossible to do justice to such a work as it is adequately to summarize, and do justice to, a great novel or indeed any work of art. Actually, there is more than a little reason for this comparison, because, in Casey’s work, the experience in question—let’s say, the glance—is always presented as situated, located in time, place, and the other coordinates that constitute the relevant context. In other words, the experience is presented in an existential narrative, a narrative into which we can always insert ourselves. Casey’s narratives are invariably a pleasure to read, not only because they are so skillfully elaborated, but also because they are written in such an existentially engaging way. It is never difficult, and always rewarding, for us to put ourselves in the place of the subjects whose experience is being described. Indeed, since the truth in phenomenological description is necessarily also performative, this truth will be missed unless we attempt to do just that.

According to Husserl’s conception, phenomenology has three main phases or dimensions. In the first, we must, as much as possible, suspend, or put out of action, all our philosophical presuppositions and accumulated distractions, or prejudgments, in order to be as attentive as possible, and as openly receptive as possible, to the way, or ways, in which the experience and object in question present themselves. This is the so-called “phenomenological reduction.” In the second phase, the so-called “eidetic reduction,” we should, if we are following Husserl’s model, turn away from the matter of perception, from sensible experience and instead make use of our “free” imagination in an attempt to get at what is “essential,” deriving an abstract universal theoretically separated from its various contingencies and life-world contexts. So, for example, whilst it is essential that the glance be quick, darting, it is not essential that it be accompanied by a smile or a shrugging of the shoulders. In the third phase, that involving the so-called “transcendental reduction,” the task is to demonstrate that, and how, the experiences in question have been “constituted” as meanings by a transcendental ego.

Now, in Casey’s work, this third phase or dimension—the one that inevitably

draws us into the strictly philosophical problems entailed by transcendental idealism—is abandoned. Wisely, I think, since it yields nothing new, nothing of any interest for our living. It is, to state my point very bluntly, a dead end. So, leaving that phase to philosophical scribblers and squabblers, Casey concentrates on the first two phases or dimensions. In fact, for the most part, he concentrates on the first. And with regard to the second, he departs in a fundamental way from the Husserlian model, for, instead of imagining variations in order to get at an absolutely determinate essence, a universal abstracted from all particulars, a universal under which the particulars taken up for reflection by the procedure of imagined variations can be subsumed—obtaining an entity quite rightly regarded, these days, with a good deal of suspicion—Casey endeavours to show us actualities, the richness of lived experience and its objects, using narratives to reveal the intriguing intricacies, unsuspected complexities, and marvelous subtleties: often things that are so familiar, so habitual, so common that we never before gave them any attention. Instead of a phenomenology serving the logic of subsumption, a logic that never does justice to the singularity of particulars, Casey follows the glance to show us a phenomenology that illuminates these particulars, presenting them in their contexts, revealed in the light of the glance. Casey's attentiveness to the real in all its singularity is in this way rather like a work of poetry, compelling our own attentiveness and revealing what is extraordinary even about the most ordinary things in our lives. In fine, in his hands, it is principally into the first phase or dimension of phenomenology that he gently guides us, drawing out from the specifics all sorts of variations, differences, nuances, so that, in the end, what he gives us is an intricate weave of experience that we have never had before, even though it is, and has been, constitutive of our everyday life: something that seems unfamiliar because it has been all too familiar. Nothing is stranger than what is closest to us.

In the discourse of philosophy, a discourse saturated with images and allegories pertaining to light and vision, it is the gaze that has been talked about, not the glance. Casey's book is thus the first study devoted to the glance. In the history of philosophy, whereas the gaze has been taken to represent the paradigm of knowledge and truth, the glance has been either taken for granted, included without specific recognition in the generalizations about vision, or else marginalized, regarded as trivial, insignificant, and too light to serve as an experience of the ethical relation and as an aesthetic approach to works of art. In colourful vignettes and rigorous analyses of the phenomenological data, thinking at the limits of phenomenology and on the border between phenomenology and cultural studies, Casey shows us why we must not ignore the many roles of the glance.

In Part I, "Approximating to the Glance," he shows us the glance as it figures in everyday life. In Part II, "Glancing Earlier and Farther Afield," this adventure in glancing continues, as we explore, with him, the fate of the glance in the

very different cultural and historical settings of the Athenian agora and the boulevards and arcades of nineteenth century Paris. In Part III, "Getting Inside the Glance," we are led to give thought to the unique temporality and singularity of the glance. And finally, in Part IV, "The Praxis of the Glance," Casey shows how the glance figures in our ethical, social, and political relations, before concluding with a no less compelling chapter on the role of the glance in aesthetic experience. If the gaze in its "spirit of gravity," petrifying whatever it sees, has drawn the attention of philosophers across the centuries, Casey shows us numerous instances of glances that "grace whatever they look at." Whereas the steadiness, constancy, and continuity of the gaze has encouraged a metaphysics of presence, encouraged the valuation of clarity and distinctness, certainty and predictability, philosophical recognition of the glance would encourage thought to attend to becoming instead of being, transience instead of constant presence, brevity instead of permanence, the surface of things instead of their depth, and discreteness instead of syntheses. If the gaze promotes contemplation, sobriety, a passive receptivity, the glance is a force of subversion, sudden, spontaneous, unpredictable, unruly: "the glance is the force of becoming in the field of vision." (162 ff)

I said that Casey does undertake a modified kind of eidetic exploration: not exactly what Husserl, who really wanted essences in something very much like the mediaeval sense, proposed; but his eidetic investigations are also not entirely different. For Casey has a Renaissance passion for taxonomies, classificatory arrangements. He loves to gather different things and put them into some kind of rational order. But unlike Husserl, Casey is more interested in noticing all the varieties in their fascinating differences than in finding the common essence, the invariant one in the many. The apodeictic essence, or "eidos," can be of interest only to a handful of transcendental idealists with a metaphysical cause to defend; the former is the very stuff that stories are made of. In the glances that appear in Part I, these are some of the character-traits we encounter: averted glances, furtive glances, admonitory glances, passing glances, inquisitive glances, distant glances, sidewise glances, abstracted glances, penetrating glances, inviting glances, seductive glances, accusative glances, open glances, forbidding glances and beady glances. With each characteristic, Casey treats us to some kind of story, some kind of setting. Simply cataloguing them in a dry order as I am doing here cannot do them justice at all. Casey's ordering is prodigious. Glances have different forms; he mentions seven: empty, insufficient, mental, checking-out, discovering, reorienting, and confirmatory. And they have levels; he names three: free, bound, geographic. There are also "singularities"; he names three: those of feature, those of region, and those of character. Going through these catalogues, as I have done here, can only be a way of promising to readers that there are wonderful adventures awaiting them if they open Casey's book and expose their glance to its surprising narratives. These catalogues

obviously prove my point, that phenomenology cannot be summarized, because, unlike other styles of philosophy, what is interesting in, or about, phenomenology is not what it can reveal of the skeleton, the deeply hidden taxonomy, but what it shows of the flesh, the surface: the stories it tells, the richness of the experiences it calls to our attention. Casey, in this regard, is unquestionably a master storyteller.

For me, one of the most fascinating features of Casey's work, evident not only in this book but in all his writings, is that, as he reflects on the vastly different experiences that his investigations gather, he shows us how he finds himself compelled by his close attention to the experiences to search for the words that will most faithfully represent them—represent them not as pinned-down truths, but as living events. Thus, in the course of his reflections on the temporality of the glance, Casey remarks that, like a bird, a glance “alights”: “It does not,” he suggests, “settle down, but perches precariously.” (277) Casey's writings abound with such beautiful movements of articulation. (Near the end of the book, in his “Afterword,” he touches on the differences between staring and glaring, peering and peeping, drawing words from situations. These illuminations are faithful to the experiences they name precisely by letting the experiences continue to interact with them.) The experiences he works with demand descriptive words or phrases that do not yet exist, words or phrases that can be brought forth only through the most exquisite, most patient, most loving attentiveness—an attentiveness and concentration that is, as Malebranche understood, akin to the devotion of prayer. The words or phrases must come from the experiences themselves; they cannot be imposed from outside. This is, in my opinion, the most intriguing and most challenging stage in the phenomenological process. And it is precisely here, at this point, that description reveals the fact that it is a performative, or formative, function. Whereas Husserl conceived of phenomenology as a purely, strictly “descriptive science,” Casey's practice shows us that this “positivism” is deadening; it actually betrays the dynamic, living character of experience as it is lived. It turns a medusan gaze onto the phenomenon, compelling it to obey its methodological preconditions. The only way to work phenomenologically with our experience is to let the experience give us its own words. And the best way to solicit these words is to tell stories. Here, then, is one, selected because of its comparative brevity:

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I am now on a bus in Wuppertal, and I glance at the person who has seated himself opposite me. My discernment of certain basic features is immediate: “heavyset”, “has been working all day”, “probably Turkish”, “middle-aged”, “melancholy, dark eyes”, “hands roughly textured”, and so on. These overtly stereotypical traits constitute my apperception

of my traveling companion as an individual who embodies a certain generic image: “a Turkish worker in Germany”. I also grasp him as someone who is not just a representative of a class or race or generation. I realize this not *after* my grasp of this man’s typicality (for we have to do with the cut of the instant in the glance, not with the amassing that occurs in prolonged perceptual looking.), but *at the same time*: I see right away his very singularity, his utter uniqueness, his difference from every stereotype (including those he seems to manifest so transparently). In other words, I take in at once both his exemplification of certain social and cultural, age and gender categories *and* his being himself, being the singular human being he is. [ . . . ] (269-70)

This exposition enables Casey to comment on the ways that other philosophers—Kierkegaard, Levinas, Nancy, and Nietzsche, for example—have addressed the question of our perception of other human beings. This is, I think, one of the thorniest, most difficult experiences for philosophical thought to interpret. Casey touches on it near the beginning of his book (41-3, 48, 50, 62) and returns to it much later, in the chapter on “The Ethics of the Glance” (350-62). Even in the merest instantaneity of a glance, he wants to say, what I see when I encounter another human being constitutes, simultaneously and immediately, both an acknowledgement of the other as a singularity and an acknowledgement of the other as a human being, a member of a common, shared humanity. Moreover, these two acknowledgements are really so intimately intertwined, so absolutely inseparable, each taking place, affirming itself, through the other, that they are, in effect, just one single moment of recognition.

Kant believed that, when we encounter others, we see (into) their souls. For the skeptic, however, this does not help to dispel the enigma—if, that is, there is one to be solved. Wittgenstein, as we know, famously declared that the best picture of the soul is the human body. In effect, he was telling philosophers not to assume, not to posit, inaccessible depths. The humanity of the other is right there for all to see—right on the surface. No insight needed, no deep, penetrating gaze required; the quickest, merest glance is sufficient. The so-called “problem of other minds,” a distinctively “modern” problem that never caused the ancients to lose one second of sleep, simply vanishes. The enigma disappears: there never was a real problem. Just as there are iatrogenic diseases, so there are unsolvable philosophical problems, illusory enigmas, generated by the peculiar turns and twists of a philosophical discourse that has wandered too far away from ordinary language and ordinary experience, getting lost in labyrinths of its own creation. Thus, the humanity of the other

is no mysterious property that requires a special gaze, a deep gaze. A glance suffices. . . .

And yet, does our history not compel us to admit that, again and again, there have been pogroms, massacres, wars, and genocides, because—some people, some human beings, have not seen the humanity in some other human beings, have not seen that these others are also human beings? Or is this way of describing the situation totally misleading? Perhaps we should say, quite simply, that, whilst the violent ones certainly do see these others as human beings, do see *that* they are human beings, they are refusing to *acknowledge* what they see? And there is nothing more, philosophically speaking, to be said about the skeptic's supposed enigma. This, it seems, is the conclusion at which Casey leaves us. But why, if this is correct, do ordinary people, not only some misguided philosophers, persist in using the vocabulary of vision to describe the tragic situations we should instead describe as refusals of acknowledgement? To understand what people see, what they do not see, and why (some) people are, as we say, "blind" to the suffering and misery of others, or "blind" to their humanity requires, I believe, something more than a glance. But whether or not the philosopher's gaze, however penetrating, however steadfast it might be, is any more capable of answering these troubling questions is itself a question I must leave unanswered.

An analogous question arises in Casey's very timely chapter on our relationship to the natural environment. Again: what do people see, not see, and why? Drawing on Levinas's phenomenology of the face to suggest, but in a way that differs from him, an analogy between the natural landscape and the human face, Casey believes that, "the glance is capable of picking up distress directly from a facialized landscape, that is to say, from its expressive surfaces and elemental intensities." (380) The glance, he thinks, can "apperceive" what is right and what is wrong in this environment. Quite so! But the decisive word, here, is of course "capable." Obviously, the glance is equally capable of *not* seeing this distress, insofar as "seeing" is taken to involve the appropriate responsivity and not mere visual exposure. To see the distress of our polluted rivers and lakes, to see the distress of our forests, to see the distress in the wild animal species, without being affected, without being moved to action, a glance might certainly suffice; but to be deeply moved by the distress one sees, hence to experience the environment as soliciting our responsibility, requires, I think, more than an untutored glance. But also more than the Romantic gaze. Casey appreciates the force of these critical points and in fact brings them lucidly into focus: Turning to a Levinasian argument, he suggests that, "even if human subjects fail to pick up the ethical command, even if they are oblivious to their force, this does not mean that they are not subject to its call to responsible action." (See, e.g., 384 ff) His argument is intended, as he says, only as a modest "prolegomenon" to an ethics of the environment, usefully pointing out that the glance can have an important, even perhaps a

decisive role in “alerting human subjects about things that need to be done.” (381)

After the sobering discussion of the role of the glance in calling attention to our responsibilities to care for the natural environment, Casey’s penultimate chapter, “Glancing at the Image in Photography and Painting,” is indeed a pleasurable relief, filled with provocative arguments and interesting “aperçus”, to borrow a word that Casey takes from Wallace Stevens. In this chapter, Casey argues that the more we recognize and appreciate the place of the glance in the making of our world, the more we will recognize and appreciate the place of the image in this process: For, “the truth is that each time my glance goes out to meet the visual allure or challenge of [the] situations [in which we find ourselves], it seeks an image.” (392) The glance moves, in fact, between the thing-world and its images, playing with the aesthetic ambiguity in the semblance that photography and painting set before us and celebrate. And in responding to the images that photographs and paintings proffer, it interacts with the gaze in numerous intricate ways—ways that Casey explores with admirable finesse. But, lest this summary give a wrong impression, I must hasten now to add that Casey’s phenomenology of the glance is not restricted to the spectator; he also considers in great detail the role of the glance both in the artist’s work-process and in the content of the artwork itself, nicely bringing out the contributions that only the glance can make. Thus, for example, he points out how, both for the spectator and for the artist, the unity and coherence of the work depends on the unifying operations of the glance, moving as it will to and fro. This is surely the peculiar “genius” of the aesthetic glance. And perhaps nowhere is it more necessary than in the experiencing of Abstract Expressionism, for, without the question of semblance to retard or arrest the glance, the painting solicits the eye’s spontaneous trajectories, yielding its pleasures in and through the movement and the freely composed patterns that they trace. In this regard, Casey’s discussion of works by Kandinsky, Klee and de Kooning introduces us to still more operations of the glance, so that, by the time we complete this chapter, we do not need his “Concluding Thoughts,” interesting and compelling though they are, to find ourselves already thoroughly convinced that the lively glance, ignored for too long, too long dismissed as insignificant, must finally share the attention that the more controlled, and more controlling gaze has enjoyed.

Elegantly written, this book, its erudition formidable, offers the reader an encyclopedic glance into a treasure-trove of information and knowledge bearing on vision: material in cinema studies, architecture, art criticism, world history, anthropology, urban studies, psychology, psychoanalysis, literature, and the natural sciences, as well as philosophy. To venture into its beckoning pages of stories is to undertake a richly rewarding journey, glancing at the world through configurations of time and space.