

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**The Phenomenological Reduction:
Aesthetics and Performance in the Videos
of Yao Ramesar¹**

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In this paper, I explore three experimental video documentaries by Trinidadian filmmaker Yao Ramesar and make a case for the videos' performance as philosophical inquiry. In particular, I suggest that Ramesar's Caribbeing aesthetic resonates with Edmund Husserl's phenomenological reduction in its movement away from appearances and towards the essence of things. I draw parallels between Husserl's psychological, transcendental and eidetic reductions and specific aesthetic strategies in Ramesar's videos. I suggest further that Ramesar's work also invites comparison with the phenomenological approaches of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

Introduction

Caribbeing is an aesthetic which involves the exclusive use of natural or available light and a strong presence of darkness, silhouette and shadow. It also makes use of extended slow motion. It is an aesthetic developed by filmmaker Robert Yao Ramesar as a means of addressing the historical and cultural ruptures of Caribbean society – colonialism, slavery and indenture. Ramesar describes Caribbeing in these terms:

At its core, it is an attempt to represent the supernatural essence of Caribbean existence beyond the realm of linear realism imposed by colonial rationalist convention.²

Caribbeing is intended to jog an audience's memory of the deep past and to facilitate a connection with that past. It aims to allow the presence of intangibles and the invisible to manifest.³ Ramesar's project is not merely a nativist return to an unchanging, essentialist past which is immediately retrievable and accessible in the present. Instead, it is grounded in a notion of ancestral spirits which continue to be present in the midst of cultural change and interchange.⁴ It suggests that the ability to *perceive* this reality has been displaced by colonial ways of viewing.

Ramesar's project is fundamentally about new ways of looking and seeing. He interrogates our habitual mode of viewing so that we might come to a new understanding of a presence that has been submerged. The result of this effort is a body of work which engages the viewer in unprecedented ways – calling the viewer into its world while at the same time keeping the viewer at bay. The experience of viewing this cinema is an experience of encounter – of distance, immersion, suspension and connection.

Ramesar's work can usefully be interpreted through Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. Husserl's is an effort to move away from the habitual or natural attitude – in which the

object of our perception is clouded by assumptions and beliefs – towards the philosophical one.⁵ The natural attitude is tied to a particular mode of scientific inquiry which imposes itself upon the object rather than allowing us to perceive the object as it truly is. Husserl aims to suspend our attachment to the habitual mode so that we might see “the things themselves.” His method for doing this is the phenomenological reduction – a means of introducing distance into our ordinary perception so that we might see the *essence* of the objects which present themselves to us.

The reduction is a reflection on the acts of consciousness which make perception possible. However, the effort to reflect on our own acts of consciousness – to *witness perception as it occurs for us* rather than merely *existing within the experience of perception* – requires a peculiar form of vigilance. As philosopher Nathalie Depraz (1999) has suggested, the phenomenological reduction must continually be remade as the investigator attempts to displace the natural attitude.⁶ Yao Ramesar’s work demonstrates a keen sense of the need to hold open that space within which interrogation, suspension and a new perception might occur.

An Act of Distancing and Interrogation

Heritage: A Wedding in Moriah is a video shot during the Heritage Festival in Tobago.⁷ The event is a re-enactment of a Christian wedding. Ramesar follows the street procession and the musicians’ performances. He shows the interior of the church and allows us to listen in on the priest’s address and a heckler’s commentary. He follows arrivals, departures and periods of waiting. In all of this, however, there is no linear progression. Ramesar does not present the event in sequence but allows us to follow, with the camera, selected points of interest. Ramesar’s video does not merely record an event but focuses instead on characters and movement.

Heritage recalls the first stage of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction – the psychological reduction or reflective conversion. The psychological reduction is a period of active interrogation.⁸ There is a stepping away from the object in an effort to reflect on the acts of consciousness which render the object perceptible to us. *Heritage* interrogates its object. The camera dwells on characters and the editing deconstructs movement. Slow motion and flash motion appear to break movement down into its constituent elements – creating a space within which we might contemplate the video’s performance, the characters’ performance and our own. The high contrast and depth of field delineate the characters and help them to stand out against their background. It is as if they are raised up out of their context – and the experience of space and distance is heightened. The video is punctuated with blackouts which alter the habitual course of consciousness. Ramesar creates gaps within our accustomed mode of viewing.

Ramesar use a sepia tone in this video which creates an air of the historical. The video probes the characters’ faces, their dresses, their hands. The camera dwells here on details – the pearls of a necklace or the fold of a dress. It invites us to see. It is as if we were probing an early photograph for evidence of what life might have been. But the characters here are very much a part of our present – they exist for us in an immediacy that is brokered by the video and by the experience of volume and depth which comes from the distance between the characters and their background. Distance is inserted here as a space for contemplation of how we come to see the objects before us and the ways in which they come to present themselves to us for vision. Ramesar’s *Heritage* presents us with the space between the act of consciousness – or the perceptual act – and the

experience of perception itself. The camera probes the objects, the objects address us tentatively. We linger, we withdraw we return to consciousness.

Acts of Suspension and Animation

Distance is but the first step in the reduction – one step in the movement towards a full encounter with the objects or the things themselves. In *Mami Wata*, Ramesar and his co-director Sonja Melton take the process of the reduction two steps further.⁹ *Mami Wata* presents the performance of an Orisha religious ceremony. It is a black and white video in extreme slow motion which follows the journey of spirit possession. *Mami Wata* highlights the ways in which the interrogation and distance of the psychological reduction pave the way for our experience of the transcendental and eidetic, each reduction reinforcing the effects of the first. *Mami Wata* is suspension, animation and a view of spiritual essence.

In Husserl's transcendental reduction, there is a bracketing or suspension of the world and of our attachment to it. The hold of the external world upon us is loosened and we focus our attention on the object itself. We allow the object to appear to us. In the eidetic reduction, we are further removed from what in the natural attitude is considered to be the real world as we are inducted into the many possibilities of the real.

In *Mami Wata*, our attachment to the world is suspended. Extreme natural backlighting creates an effect similar to that of the stereoscopic view. The stereoscopic view is a layered view in which characters stand out against their background and there is an impression of fullness and dimension. It is the view introduced in *Heritage* but brought to fruition here. In *Mami Wata*, the characters do not merely stand out but appear to be lifted out of their background. The main participant in this video appears to glide across the surface of the video and of her world. She is suspended as she moves towards us. The fixed camera positions and the dreamy black and white slow motion facilitate this experience of suspension. So too does the ritual performance space of the circle add to the experience of bracketing.

In addition to the loosening of attachment – and indeed through this loosening – we are called upon in this video to witness. Ramesar has worked to produce a hybrid of the still and moving image which, in *Mami Wata*, creates an impression of becoming.¹⁰ We watch the woman as she moves through the scene and, as she journeys through possession, it seems that what we are witnessing is an appearing. We see not merely the participant herself but something else which comes forth through her. She moves towards us, and almost outside of the frame. It is a material and non-material excess. What moves towards us cannot, it seems, be contained by the woman's own material body or by the material body of the video.

Mami Wata offers a unique opportunity to bring into conversation several strands of phenomenological investigation. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, vision is made possible through an embodied consciousness and a reciprocal gaze. For Merleau-Ponty, also, the visible is a kind of "concretion" that materializes out of a background of the invisible.¹¹ In *Mami Wata*, the main participant meets our gaze. Her consciousness and ours are both altered and we are called upon to witness the manifestation of a spiritual essence through the medium of her body. Merleau-Ponty helps us to recognize that the loosening of our attachment to habitual modes of viewing can open the way towards new forms of embodied consciousness and perception. *Mami Wata* also points us in the direction of

Martin Heidegger and the notion of being. For Heidegger, phenomenological vision involves the manifestation of the underlying being which is associated with each specific being – in this case, the specific body of the woman possessed in *Mami Wata*. That manifestation or unconcealment is tied, not to acts of consciousness, but to the adoption of a certain attitude of openness.¹² In *Mami Wata*, the openness created by distance and suspension facilitates our access to the being of the participant – and allows us also to experience this manifestation as the effect of Husserl's eidetic reduction in which we recognize the manifold possibilities of the real. *Mami Wata* suggests the possibility of a confluence of approaches in the phenomenological imperative to get to the things themselves.

Enfolding Presence and Immersion

In *Journey to Ganga Mai*, Husserl's reduction finds a certain resolution.¹³ The Hindu festival of Ganga Dasharaa presented here is enveloped in circular, repetitive imagery and sound. In this video, we do not simply bracket or suspend our attachment to the world but are called into the world of the video.

Journey to Ganga Mai does not fit neatly into any of the stages of Husserl's reduction. It does not offer a space for reflection on our acts of consciousness. It does not call for us to witness. Instead, *Journey to Ganga Mai* draws us in. We become both subjects and objects of vision.¹⁴ We are immersed in the flow of the river, the ritual gestures and the incantatory singing. The distance between ourselves and the objects of our vision is drastically reduced. We no longer stand apart from the object and contemplate its dissolution or the ways in which it comes to be for our vision. Nor do we look on as invisible essence moves towards us and outside of the frame. Instead, we meet the objects of our vision and we find connection there.

The Ganga Dasharaa festival celebrates the coming to earth of the goddess of the river and the video transmits this mystical quality. In *Journey to Ganga Mai*, there is no stark contrast or exaggerated depth of field. There is no stereoscopic view. Instead, the participants appear to be a *part* of their background – a part of the river in its unending flow. As in *Heritage* there is no linear progression here. One woman pours libations. Another sets flowers upon the water. A large cloth is suspended above. Another offering is released to the water – but perhaps it is the same. All that is set upon the river seems destined to return. The fluid cuts on motion suggest a return to source. The mantra closes off worldly distractions and suggests an experience of recurring, indivisible time. The world of this video is self-contained. It connects to no excess outside of the frame. It folds in upon itself, renews itself and draws us in. The encounter is an encounter with that which seemingly can no longer be reduced. In this sense, *Journey to Ganga Mai* is perhaps the ultimate reduction – a return to the object at its core.

Yao Ramesar's work is a philosophical inquiry into the ways in which an unseen presence might show itself to be acting in the world. It is a movement away from conceptions of reality which deny the connection between the material and the non-material worlds. In this work, habitual modes of seeing are temporarily displaced. In their stead, there are new pathways towards looking that reinvigorate our visual perception and pose new challenges to the practice of cinema itself.

¹ This paper is based on my doctoral dissertation. Gabrielle Hezekiah. *Being, Consciousness and Time: Phenomenology and the Videos of Robert Yao Ramesar*. Unpublished Phd dissertation. University of Toronto. 2006.

² Robert Yao Ramesar. "Caribbeing: Technique and Technology in Caribbean Still & Motion Picture Aesthetics." Paper read at *The Caribbean – Towards 2000 – Models for Multi-Cultural Arts Education*. St. Augustine: The University of the West Indies, 1997.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Interview with the author, 2004.

⁵ See Edmund Husserl. *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Trans. Lee Hardy. (Dordrecht, Neth.: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.)

⁶ Nathalie Depraz. "The Phenomenological Reduction as Praxis." In *The View from Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness*. Edited by F.J. Varela and J. Shear. (Thoverton, U.K.: Thoverton Academic, 1999.)

⁷ *Heritage: A Wedding in Moriah*. Robert Yao Ramesar, Trinidad and Tobago, 1997, 12 min., video.

⁸ The strategies of each stage of the reduction are borrowed from Depraz (1999).

⁹ *Mami Wata*. Robert Yao Ramesar, Trinidad and Tobago, 1996 [1992], 10 min., video.

¹⁰ Interview with the author, 2004.

¹¹ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible (Followed by Working Notes)*. Translated by A. Lingis. Edited by C. Lefort. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968.)

¹² See Martin Heidegger. *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Translated by A. Hofstadter. Edited by J.M. Edit. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988.)

¹³ *Journey to Ganga Mai*. Robert Yao Ramesar, Trinidad and Tobago, 1999, 10 min., video.

¹⁴ This insight is borrowed from Sobchack. Vivian Sobchack. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992.)