

‘Vertigo in the City: Conversations between the Sciences, Arts and Humanities’

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Vertigo and Phenomenology – The Body and the City

Abstract:

One of the classic definitions of phenomenology is “the study of how phenomena appear to the consciousness” - or how things in the world *appear to us*, in human experience, as distinct from what they are ‘in themselves’. In considering the ways in which contemporary cities are experienced it seems natural that phenomenology would have something to offer. In fact, in each of the key thinkers from the phenomenological tradition – Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, there are suggestive insights into the nature of perceptual experience that could help shed light on the phenomenon of urban vertigo. Heidegger’s notion of *anxiety* as a key characteristic of being-in-the-world, as well as Husserl’s understanding of time as a complex layering of past, present and future, both suggest that our grasp of the situation that is continually unfolding before us is not something immediately given but rather something that has to be worked for. Likewise Merleau-Ponty’s description of the role of the *body schema* as more than a static image of the body but rather a constantly developing range of skills for coping with the world, further highlights the fact that even our sense of basic bodily orientation exists in a state of fundamental instability and with the constant risk of breakdown.

Recent research in so-called ‘embodied cognitive science’ also leans heavily on this earlier work in phenomenology, particularly on the notion of human intelligence as it emerges from – and is framed by – the particular form of human embodiment. One of the most significant writers in this emerging area is the cognitive philosopher Andy Clark, whose influential work on the ‘extended mind’ has sought to explain how the environment offers a kind of cognitive scaffolding to our ongoing mental processes. His recent research on ‘predictive processing’ further suggests how the brain is able to deal more effectively with the ongoing flow of sensory information by projecting forwards its expectations about what is about to appear in perception, and this may also go some way to explaining the peculiar difficulty of handling rapidly changing and unpredictable urban environments.
