1. The Utrecht School – Quotidian Phenomenology

2. By means of some slides of Dutch paintings I like to do a little bit of history about a qualitative tradition that used to be called the University of Utrecht School or the Utrecht School of phenomenology or phenomenological psychology. The Utrecht School is an informal title and refers to the work of an assortment of phenomenologically oriented psychologists, educators, pedagogues, pediatricians, criminologists, jurists, psychiatrists, and other medical doctors, who formed a more or less close association of like-minded academic practitioners. This movement is unique since it predates the newly emerging interest in what could be called a “phenomenology of practice.” The practical program of the Utrecht proponents required that knowledge of human existence be gathered by observations of everyday life situations and events.

3. For this purpose I introduce a new word: “Dutch seeing”. Now Canadians and Americans know quite a few such expressions: Going Dutch, Dutch Courage, Dutch Treat. …

But what is Dutch Seeing? I will take a bit of a risky approach by using some selected Dutch 16th and 17th century art to illustrate—and suggest that this special kind of seeing by some of these Dutch painters bears a certain resemblance to what Merleau-Ponty called “the phenomenological attitude” and “phenomenological attentiveness.” Phenomenology is not just a research method, it is a special way of standing in the world and regarding the things of the world. It is a pathos.

4. I will first show a famous Italian painting and then contrast with a Dutch painting. Until recently it was common to view and evaluate art by standards set by the Italian masters such as the graceful Primavera by Boticelli. Historians and art critics have interpreted the mythology of the Primavera in a neoplatonic perspective. A little while ago, I visited Italy and one of the nice things about renting the tour-guide headphones is that these
paintings are interpreted. _Venus_ standing in the centre of the picture, above her _Cupid_ is aiming one of his arrows of love at the three dancing _Graces_. The Garden of the goddess of love is guarded by _Mercury_ (he is wearing winged shoes) on the left. From the right, _Zephyr_, the god of the winds, is pursuing a nymph. Next to her walks _Flora_, the goddess of spring, who is scattering flowers.

At a more iconographic level the painting can be interpreted to express the moral and metaphysical Neoplatonic ideas that were fashionable amongst de’ Medici.

5. Italian painters have commonly set the standards for composition and interpretive theme in terms of which art in more northern countries like Holland were judged. And many Dutch artists made the compulsory pilgrimage to Italy and from thereon painted Dutch subjects against Italian landscapes. But some painters like _Brueghel_ (the opening slide) and here _Jan Steen_ were differently motivated. _Jan Steen_ painted numerous family and everyday life situations and ordinary life scenes. Even when he based his painting on a moral theme or proverb then there was not really anything to interpret. The meaning was right there to be seen in the happening of the activities including, as you can see, young boys trying a smoke.

6. If you had visited a country school you would see for yourself all the goings on of the moment you walked in. The painting is rich in detail and classroom situations.

7. You might recognize the scruffy kids and the less than handsome teacher if you would meet them after school.

8. In contrast compare the famous “Birth of Adam” by _Michelangelo_. Full of biblical and symbolic meaning. You have to know the bible in order to know how to possibly interpret the painting.

9. And again, in contrast, a Dutch everyday life painting by _Gerard Terborch_, of a mother ridding her child of fleas. Look at the pose of the child, a ball in hand, leaning back against her mother. This is an experiential recognizable moment. Perhaps your mom never
inspected your hair for fleas but you can recognize what it must feel like.

10. And here is a boy doing the same trick to his dog, who seems to suffer the experience with a certain resigned passivity.

11. Quickly again a Michelangelo. The famous biblical scene of Noah’s drunkenness and his sons mockingly pointing at him.


13. In Dutch there is an old phrase “naar het leven” (literally “after life”) meaning taken from life itself, just like life. In contrast “uyt den geest” is also an old Dutch phrase meaning that it comes from the intellect, the mind or spirit.

14. Metsu’s painting the sick child is—as if taken from life—naar het leven. Note how real this moment of the sick child whose listless face and limp body are so in contradiction of how children usually behave. And the mother’s worrisome face, her arm supportive and protective and her other hand as if monitoring the child’s being. This is almost a phenomenological picture showing us the child’s experience and the relational.

15. Vermeer’s painting of the young woman pouring milk.

16. And here the well-known Children’s Games, by Pieter Brueghel the Elder. The different games are so vividly portrayed that the painting could be studied as an ethnographic relic of the kinds of games children’s cultures. Many of these games we do not see any longer.

17. And a winter landscape scene with skaters, a bird trap and it seemed an early hockey game (sorry to the Canadians who thought they invented ice hockey).
18. This time a winter scene by Hendrick Avercamp. This painting is full of rich detail. Even a skater making a bad fall.

19. So far we have noticed these characteristics of Dutch seeing.

20. But Michelangelo was not very impressed with this kind of artistry. He has been quoted as saying: “Flemish [another word for Belgium and Dutch] painting… will… appeal to women, especially to the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony. In Flanders they paint with a view to external exactness or such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill… They paint stuffs and masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees, and rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes, with many figures on this side and many figures on that. And all this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skilful choice or boldness and, finally, without substance or vigor.”

21. Nevertheless when we quickly skim some more Avercamp winter scenes we can appreciate what was going on in the village, the weather on that days, and the changing atmosphere of the environment.

22. …same here, note the weatherlike atmosphere of this particular day

23. Note by the way, the outhouse where someone was just going to the washroom—you can see the naked bum.


25. That is also why Italian painters seemed to have had little interest in painting portraits of clients while Dutch painters were heavily involved in portraiture, often as a means to make a living...

Compared to Italian art, Dutch art was oriented to difference: to
uniqueness and singularity. Even in Dutch portraits it is striking how these bring out the individuality and uniqueness of the person portrayed. Sometimes, when a husband and wife would have their family painted in the context of a biblical scene the result would be that they looked dressed up to act the scene. Thus, Alpers argues that Dutch art is connected to “a desire to preserve the identity of each person and each thing in the world” (p. 78).

In a world that is intent on seeing individual identities and on the unique differences between things each face in a portrait or painting is strikingly different and singular in its appearance. In a manner Dutch painters like Jan Steen, Gerard Terborch and Vermeer are saying, “Only variations, differences, singularities are real—and to see them you only have to open your eyes.” So we need to realize that description is not a simple straightforward activity—what is being described in not just a concrete scene but also a piece of humanity that gives the description a ubiquitously universalistic sensibility.

26. Gabriel Metsu: What makes the experience of epistolarity, of writing and reading a letter unique and different from other first person narratives (such as a journal writing)? There is the intent of addressing someone (in writing) and feeling addressed by someone (in reading). In writing a letter we usually expect a response in exchange. Metsu creates two paintings of lovers writing and reading love letters. The man and woman are separated by the frames of their respective depictions, reminding us that love letters are necessitated by physical separation. This way of using paired paintings to create the tension of absence was not done by anyone else at the time. Because there is a gap in time between writing the letter and receiving the letter, the present time for the writer of the letter is the past time for the addressee. When the writer is writing he or she is usually “writing to the moment, speaking to the addressee as if he or she were present.”

27. Terborch “writing a letter” “The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect the reader and is affected by the reader.” “How are you?” is often an implicit understanding. Note how in this painting the letter writer seems to be absorbed in her writing. If we were to ask where is she? In Terborch’s painting she is in her words.
28. The same with a lady reading a Letter. We look at her but she is not really there. She seems to be transported into the space created by the letter.

29. Terborch: A lady receiving a letter. Here the deliverer of the letter and the lady receiving and reading the letter are each caught up in their own space. Note how it is hard to read the face of the woman reading the letter. She dwells in the letter while hiding her interior behind a blank expression.

30. Terborch: Reading a letter. Notice how much more interesting are the demeanours of all the people in this room. The lady reading the letter cannot help but betray her inward experience in her facial expression and posture. The onlookers also are involved in the secrecy of the inner lives.

31. Vermeer: Receiving a letter. While Terborch’s women reading and writing letters are absorbed in the words of the letters, Vermeer’s women are absorbed in themselves. I am fascinated by the meanings evoked by this incredible painterly “description”. The servant kind of gloating. Her mistress kind of hesitant, as if she feels her secret betrayed or uncovered.

The letter has the potential to bridge understanding between the writer and the addressee, but also may serve to create distance. The strange thing is that the mere act writing letters creates closeness even if the letter itself creates distance such as in conflictual love letters.

32. Metsu: The letterwriter surprised. In Metsu’s painting the man looks over the shoulder of the woman. It is as if he is gaining access to her interiority as she writes herself into her words. In Metsu’s “A letter writer surprised” the woman writing the letter does not realize that someone (her husband?) is peering over her shoulder. He seems to be gazing at the words appearing from her writing hand as they gradually reveal secrets of her inner self. Again these paintings do not need interpretation to be appreciated. They seem to describe an experience.
33. In Vermeer paintings the perspective is turned. The gaze of the onlooker shifts to the painter, Vermeer, himself. Vermeer is said to have been obsessed with the desire to see the woman he paints in her singularity, in her unique and enigmatic self. With Vermeer the experience of looking, of seeing the woman reading a letter becomes an experience of the woman’s self-containment and her elusiveness. The inaccessible content of the letter becomes the elusive inner inaccessibility of the woman herself—and we become the one’s spying. Except that with Vermeer it is not the words or the letter but the interiority of the women herself that becomes the subject of attention.

Woman in Blue. This becomes especially powerfully evident in the famous painting of the Woman in Blue, named after the inimitable blue paint that Vermeer was able to produce for his palette. Here the majestic figure of the reading woman gives us the experience of her strong presence and her doubly elusive absence: while present in her external self the woman is absent in her absorption in the letter, and absent in the absorption in her own inner being.

34. In contrast Rembrandt’s Bathsheba is a painting that is filled with narrative material to the knowing onlooker. Here Bathsheba has just read the letter from King David telling her of his love for her. And in spite of her full naked presence, what is made visible are her inner thoughts and feelings. We already know that King David will have her husband killed so that he can marry her. Does her contemplative face express foreknowledge of the sacrifices that will be made for the realization of this biblical love? Rembrandt’s painting enters into another dimension than the descriptive Dutch tradition.

35. Dutch seeing--Now this interest in the everyday lifeworld and special attentiveness to specific and unique situations also characterized the work of the phenomenologists of the Utrecht School from roughly 1945 till the mid sixties.

36. This is a picture of a bookcover that is still in my possession. I read this when I was about 18 and in teachers’ college.
37. The contributors were some of the best known members of the Utrecht School although they were in very different professional disciplines.

38. .... contents

39. Here are some names. Note their backgrounds.

40. And yet, the Utrecht School of phenomenology was virtually unknown. Spiegelberg, in his famous comprehensive and encyclopedic study of phenomenology around the word--entitled The Phenomenological Movement--only mentions the Utrecht School once in a very brief sentence.

41. But many years later, in his book Doing Phenomenology, he suddenly mentions the work of the Dutch school when he laments about the irrelevance of mainstream phenomenology as conducted by his contemporary philosophers and phenomenological psychologist.

42. He says: “I have been disappointed by the relative sterility in recent phenomenological philosophy ... especially in comparison with what happened in such countries as ... the Netherlands. What is needed today is a revival of the spirit of doing phenomenology directly on the phenomena, ‘the things’... What can be done to reawaken it [this spirit] in a very different setting?”

43. So what was he referring to? Well people like Langeveld, Buylendijk, van den Berg and others who took everyday life concerns as topics for their phenomenological attentiveness. Langeveld spoke of the home, garden, kitchen approach to the lifeworld.

44. Summing up: “Dutch seeing” means that these painters begin (a) to explore everyday life scenes (rather than idealized, spiritual scenes) attend to these scenes descriptively (rather than narratively / interpretively). (b) depict these scenes in an experiential, concrete and down-to-earth manner. (c) being attentive to “things” not normally attended to (objects, experiences). (d) become attentive to the distinctness or unique
identity of these objects and subjects. (e) seek in this distinctness (not sameness but) difference, singularity

45. As a Canadian person with a Dutch childhood, Dutch schooling, and Dutch sentiments it has always puzzled me that there seem to be such culturally distinct ways of seeing and being attentive to things in our world—and I do not know if we can explain these differences. This is true also for the way we look at children.

46. Phenomenology: (a) begins with what is “given” in immediate or prereflective experience (before we think of it). (b) distinguishes between the “lived experience” of the world and the intellectual, conceptual, or theoretical account of it. (c) aims to “describe” the singularity or distinct uniqueness of a phenomenon (“describe” means linguistically bringing into nearness lived experience). (d) provides a “method” for investigating such possible human experiences (the method of the reduction, the addressive or vocative). (e) the “method” is conditioned by the phenomenological “attitude” of attentiveness—always asking how we live it, always questioning assumptions of what and how we know something. (f) the “method” may supported by empirical and reflective research methods and techniques.
Phenomenology engages a radical, primal, or hyper reflection: it reflects on what is prior to reflection—lived experience.

Actually looking at paintings is phenomenologically speaking an interesting form of perception. What speaks or shows itself in a painting may not be immediately or unambiguously clear. And yet we are captivated by or drawn to something. Merleau-Ponty explained how perception is always unconscious. He means that we see the world before we think it. This is really a simple way of referring to what Husserl calls the primal impressional consciousness. In the instant of the moments of our daily existence, we always are somehow conscious of more than we know. And when we focus or reflect on something then what we bring into awareness we lift up so to speak from this primal consciousness.

And yet in this radically reflective attention there lies an instant of recognition, of reawakening in consciousness what belongs to the tentional complexity of primal impressional consciousness.

Other is always already there before we are a self.

Consciousness constitutes itself by consuming what is other, and recognizes itself in it.

We cannot understand higher or more complex forms of recognition from the simpler forms. Rather we must proceed from the complex to the simpler forms that are presumed by it.