

10-1-2014

Waldenfels' Responsive Phenomenology of the Alien: An Introduction

Norm Friesen
Boise State University

Waldenfels' Responsive Phenomenology of the Alien: An Introduction

Norm Friesen (PhD), Boise State University, USA

Email: normfriesen@boisestate.edu

Merleau-Ponty has famously said of phenomenological reflection that it “steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice” (1962, p. xiii) Bernhard Waldenfels, whose notion of responsiveness forms the focus of this reflective review, studied under Merleau-Ponty at the *Collège de France* in the early 1960s. Waldenfels has characterized his own work as “a further development of the existential-structural phenomenology in Merleau-Ponty’s sense” (1997, p. xvii). At the same time, Waldenfels diverges in fundamental ways from Merleau-Ponty and thus from a number of phenomenological *doxa*. For example, he characterizes his own “responsive phenomenology” as an

open and adaptable form of phenomenology... in which intentionality (intending, grasping something as something) is transformed into responsiveness (responses to claims). *What* we respond to is always more than the *answer* we give under certain circumstances and within certain orders. Rationality can thus be understood as responsive rationality stemming from the creative answers themselves... (as quoted in Waldenfels 1997, p. xvii)

This précis, quoted at the outset of Waldenfels’ first book in English translation, raises any number of questions: How can intentionality, which Waldenfels himself characterizes as the “shibboleth” of phenomenology (2011, p. 21), be “transformed” into something else? And how could this “something else” then be described in terms of a response to “claims”? Going further, how could this responsiveness, this type of intentionality, be characterized as a “rationality?” And finally, what does this have to do with the special theme of this issue, “being online?”

My task in this reflective review is to consider the first three questions as they are addressed by Waldenfels in his three English-language books. Additionally, I will address the fourth question, about being online, by examining a number of Waldenfels’ own references to computer media, particularly one occurring in the as-of-yet untranslated text *Displacements of place and time: Modes of embodied experience (Ortsverschiebungen, Zeitverschiebungen: Modi leibhafter Erfahrung; 2009)*.

Chronologically, the translated texts at the center of this article are: *Order in the Twilight* (1996) translated by D.J. Parent from *Ordnung in Zwielficht* (1987), and published by University of Ohio Press. The second, *The Question of the Other* (2007) is based on a series of English-language lectures delivered by Waldenfels at the Chinese University in Hong Kong. The third is *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts* (2011), translated by A. Kozin and T. Stähler from *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden* (2006). Unlike some of Waldenfels’ untranslated works (e.g., his 650-page *Antwortregister* or *Response Register*), all three of these volumes are slight, reaching around 100 pages each (excluding any notes or apparatus). The last two of these books, *The Question of the Other* and *Phenomenology of the Alien*, often cover the

same ground, but do so with illuminating variations in emphasis. These last two works also offer abbreviated overviews of Waldenfels' thought, such that many of their short chapters can be said to correspond to an entire text or problematic in Waldenfels' more recent oeuvre. Thus, the chapter "Response to the Other" from *The Question of the Other* can be seen as a précis of his 650-page *Antwortregister* (or *Response Register*); the chapter on "Thresholds of Attention" in the *Phenomenology of the Alien* can be seen as a treatment of themes from his 2004 book *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit* (or *Phenomenology of Attention*).

From Intentionality to Responsivity¹

This article begins by addressing the question of the transformation of intentionality into responsivity. Waldenfels' transformation of this central phenomenological construct corresponds to his transposition of a number of other basic phenomenological terms. Instead of intentionality joining "us" with "the world" (as in Merleau-Ponty's phrasing), responsivity arises for Waldenfels between "order" on the one hand and the "alien" on the other. Correspondingly, his focus is on boundaries, borders and limits: on thresholds of attention, on the twilight of order, on the human as a "liminal being" (2011, pp. 8-20), and significantly, on the *dia*, the "between words," as contained in the word *dialog* (1996, p. 21). "Order" for Waldenfels takes many different forms, from the ordered cosmos of the ancients and scholastics to the order implied in habit and the *habitus*. It is closely linked to intentional and sense-making thought and action, and with traditional notions of the subject: "one" that "would arrogate to ... [it]self a universal coordinating function" (Waldenfels, 1996, p. 73).

As indicated, Waldenfels' principle interest in "order" and "orders" is not as much in their histories and classification as in their transgression, and their (self) dissolution into that which escapes sense and is unordered:

The establishment of orders with their legitimacy, including the genealogy of true and false, of good and evil, is neither relatively nor absolutely valid. It is not at all valid, since the fact that there are binary standards is not itself subject to these standards, unless their genesis is once again concealed and the respective opposition is hypostatized. Each order has its blind spot in the form of something unordered that does not merely constitute a deficit... In other words: the fact of reason is itself not reasonable. (2011, p. 13)

An order, in still other words, is grounded or legitimated by something outside of itself, outside of its own categories and their interrelationships. This "something" cannot then simply be integrated or subsumed (in)to the order. That which one would glimpse as undergirding an order, through its gaps and in its blind spots, in its moments of twilight, is the alien, *das Fremde*.

For myself and perhaps for other English-language readers as well, talk of "the alien" in philosophical discourse itself sounds rather strange. It doesn't bring to mind the ontological ethics of Derrida or Levinas as much as it suggests invasive life-forms from another planet or undocumented crossings of borders. But such commonplace associations are actually quite apt. The alien is quite different from the other in its origin and the dynamics of the events associated with it. Waldenfels' compares and contrasts it to "the other" by beginning with the assertion that

¹ "From Intentionality to Responsivity" is also the title of a paper delivered by Waldenfels that provides a brief but clear overview of his phenomenology of the alien. It is available at: http://learningspaces.org/files/Waldenfels_1999.pdf

the alien is more radical than –or in Waldenfels’ words, “preeminent” to– the other. Using his background in Greek and Latin (languages he taught at a private school in the late 1960’s), Waldenfels explains that this

...pre-eminence becomes obvious as soon as we confront the special phenomenon of the alien with the category of the other, one of the most traditional forms of ontology. What we encounter as alien is not simply something other or different. [...] Otherness, first analyzed in Plato’s *Sophist*, comes about through a process of delimitation (*Abgrenzung*) which opposes the same (*ταὐτόν, idem*) to the other (*ἕτερον, aluid*). When distinguishing between apple and pear, between table and bed, nobody would claim that the one is alien or foreign to the other. The one is simply different... (2007, p. 7)

“Pear” can be the other of “apple,” and “table” the other of “bed.” The one is “simply different from the other” as Waldenfels says; “it is what the other is *not*” (2007, p. 7; emphasis added). At the same time, the other represents a kind of counter-point or “double” of the self. The key moment or act in the emergence of the other is the self’s delimitation of a boundary separating itself from the other. By way of contrast, the alien it exceeds this oppositional logic of self and other, and the “onto-logic” of simply defining something “by what it *is*” or what it is *not*. Unlike “the other,” the alien

does not arise from a mere process of delimitation [of self and other]. It emerges from a process which is realized simultaneously as an inclusion (*Entgrenzung*) and an exclusion (*Ausgrenzung*). The alien is not opposed to the same, rather it refers to the *Self* (*αὐτός, ipse*), to myself or to ourselves, including the “sphere of ownness” ...from which it escapes. What is alien does not simply appear different, rather it arises from elsewhere. The sphere of alienness is separated from my sphere of ownness by a threshold, as is the case for sleep and wakefulness, health and sickness, age and youth, and no one ever stands on both sides of the threshold at the same time. (2007, p. 7)²

In describing this dynamic further, the popular connotations of the word “alien” –as crossing borders or as “entering” from points unknown– could not be more pertinent. This is the way that a sickness “invades” the state or experience of a body in health, or the way that wakefulness asserts itself over sleep. At the same time, there is a counter-movement that accompanies the alien’s assertion, and this is *withdrawal*. As sickness comes upon the body, health also withdraws; similarly, it is sleep that withdraws as wakefulness arises. The first motion of transgression can have the character of a figurative “thorn,” “barb” or “sting” – as in Waldenfels’ (yet untranslated) study *Der Stachel des Fremden* (*The Sting of the Alien*). The second phenomenon of withdrawal,

² Although some of these points of contrast between the alien and the other quoted above come from *The Question of the Other*, in this text (as the title indicates), Waldenfels uses the term “other” for what is consistently rendered elsewhere in translation as “alien.” (He justifies this by saying that the difference between “other” and “alien” is not as explicit in English as in German –adding that “in any case it should be clear what we are speaking about.”) Significantly, the translators of the more recent *Phenomenology of the Alien* have made a conscious choice to avoid this ambiguity, and in this sense it offers a significantly clearer introduction to Waldenfels’ thought. I have made a similar mistake in translating a text by Wilfried Lippitz for this same journal: “Foreignness and Otherness in Pedagogical Contexts” (2007; 1/1). Unaware at that time of translations of Waldenfels’ work, I chose to translate “alien” as “foreign.”

on the other hand, is one of becoming absent, something that is generally evident only reflexively and retroactively. Together these events delineate a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion—a pattern in which something is not simply differentiated or “made other,” but rather included or excluded from a sphere or order of “ownness.” In this way, the self, through its very constitution, unwittingly requires the withdrawal of the alien, and thus also allows for the moment of transgression by it.

“Ownness” is defined by an exclusion or an absence, just as order is disrupted through the appearance of the alien. Ownness “arises when something withdraws from it, and exactly that which withdraws is what we experience as alien or heterogeneous” (2011, p. 11). Using the example not of waking or falling ill, but of birth, Waldenfels explains further:

[This] means that something is there by being absent, that something is near by moving far away. This shift starts with one’s own birth, which is never fully one’s own, as it is never actively experienced and is never a subject of free choice. An “absolute present,” which would gather in it all sense, belongs to the phantasms of traditional orders that deny their origin. (2011, p. 18)

One’s birth does not withdraw in the sense that it ceases to be (or to *have been*) real. Instead, it withdraws in the sense that it cannot be experienced, or re-experienced, and that it steadily recedes into the past and is constantly superseded through the gradual constitution of the “self” that originates through it. Being “born again,” in the sense of making one’s birth fully one’s own through a conscious act of decision-making, can thus be seen as giving rise to an order that is constantly destabilized through the denial of its alien origin.

As the examples of birth, sleep and illness all suggest, the alien is also profoundly corporeal. Its assertion and withdrawal are not only experienced in relationship with the outside world, but also from (within) our own bodies. “In the end,” Waldenfels explains, “our bodily and embodied experiences show that I have the Other within myself and myself within the Other before we encounter each other” (2011, p. 56). Signs of illness, growth, age or of everyday exhaustion can surprise us with their own “sting” as surely as any event taking place outside of the body. In addition, Waldenfels points out, “we are never entirely present to ourselves as embodied beings.” The body is unlike any other object in that, though its five senses, and thus in multiple ways, it is both observer and observed. However, it is not so much that there are parts of the body (e.g., eyes, nose, skin) that *can* sense and others that *are* sensed: It is instead more complex, as Waldenfels explains:

our body does not fit into this dualistic scheme. On the one hand, our body is exactly both at once: seeing and seen, hearing and heard, touching and touched, moving and moved. This noncoincidence ... characterizes the very being of our body, which refers to itself and at the same time evades itself.

The body fulfills these roles through its many reflexive intertwinings and folds of self-reference. And it is in this reflexivity in particular that the alien not only appears but also withdraws, or rather, undergoes self-withdrawal: “In the nexus of self-reference and self-withdrawal that designates its mode of being, the body proves to be an emblem of the alien, as it were” (2011, p. 6). I return to this intriguing but perplexing question of corporeal alienness and ownness in my conclusion.

The experiential dynamic involved in (non-)relation of the own and the alien is not accounted for by intentionality, the goal-directed sense-making so familiar to phenomenological analysis. Neither the event of the “sting” of the alien nor its becoming-absent are expressions of intention. As in the introductory quote at the beginning of this review, Waldenfels characterizes intentionality as “*something* show[ing] itself *as something*,” –that which is “given, apprehended, understood or interpreted *as something* i.e. endowed with a certain sense” (2007, p. 72). It is precisely this assignation that is exceeded through the experiential dynamic of the alien. Merleau-Ponty’s “intentional threads” which attach us to “the world” are not so much slackened as they are severed or suspended by the alien. Waldenfels refers to this moment simply as an “event,” one in which intentionality (taking “something *as something*”) may certainly be present but is not dominant:

In sum, everything that appears [to us] as something has to be described not simply as something which receives a sense, but as something which provokes sense without being meaningful itself yet still as something *by which* we are touched, affected, stimulated, surprised and to some extent violated. I call this happening *pathos*, *Widerfahrnis* or affect, marked by a hyphen in order to suggest that something is done *to us*. (2007, p. 74; emphases in original)

Waldenfels’ notion of *pathos*, of this excess that touches, affects and even violates is challenging. Perhaps the most convenient point of entry may be by way of a brief analysis of the word “*Widerfahrnis*” that he repeatedly uses in speaking of *pathos*. This term begins with a prepositional prefix (*wider*) meaning “against;” this is followed by the verb for experience, “*fahren*,” to travel (with *erfahren* meaning to experience). The word ends, finally, with a substantivizing suffix, “-nis.” Together, these meanings suggest the kind of “friction” that is inherent in all experience. It arises not from one’s own action, but precisely through one’s *passivity*. It is “experience despite oneself” and “against the grain,” so to speak. It is a specific happening which jolts us, is negative, shakes us up, rattles us. Something drives (*fahren*) against us, so to speak, rather than just toward us.³ And as these characterizations suggest, the “event,” the encounter with the alien, is not something that occurs only sporadically, but is ongoing, a part of every event: “Everything that happens to us, right up to the limit events of birth and death which are repeated in our life in different ways, may be called *pathos*, which is to be understood as what in German is called *Widerfahrnis*” (2007, p. 45). As the words “*pathos*” and “provocation” themselves suggest, our response to the “event” is not one of sense-making or ordering, but of a particular reaction, a sensing and feeling that exceeds and envelops cognition:

Responsivity goes beyond every intentionality because responding to that which happens to us cannot be exhausted in the meaning, understanding, or truth of our response. All this is not restricted to the affective background of our cognitive and practical modes of comportment; it concerns these modes in their essence... (2011, p. 28)

As if to underscore the penetration of response to the essence of our cognitive and practical modes, Waldenfels also draws our attention origin of the terms “responsive” and “responsivity.” In the German language, they originate in mid-20th century gestaltist psychology and other

³ I owe this last sentence or characterization to a personal email communication from Tanja Westfall-Greiter of the University of Innsbruck.

“behavior theorists” as well as in 19th century studies of medicine, all of which emphasize a non-cognitive, unmediated response to the world or the environment (see: Waldenfels 2011, p. 63). Response thus exceeds cognition and modes of comportment, and also goes beyond intentionality, transforming this “shibboleth” into something rather different. This explanation, then, represents my answer to the first question posed regarding Waldenfels’ “responsive” phenomenology, and its transformation of intentionality.

Response to “Claims” and Responsive Rationality

The second question posed at the outset of this piece asks how such a responsivity can then be described in terms of a response to “claims;” and the third question inquiring after the “rationality” of such a response. The answer to the second question, about “claims,” begins with the German root for the word “response,” which is the term *Antwort*, the basis for the English cognate “answer.” Thus, the title of Waldenfels’ 650-page book *Antwortregister* is literally “Answer-Register” --although it is certainly not a FAQ or “registry” of answers, as this transliteration suggests (and the translation suggested by Kozin and Stähler, 2011). As Waldenfels explains in *Order in Twilight*, one of the most basic forms of response is the reply or answer to a question:

Asking a question is an interlocutory event, a remarkable kind of event. It is an event that does not come to rest in itself but aims for the answer as another event, without itself bringing that event about. Yet this does not involve a sequence of occurrences unreeling according to merely empirical laws connecting them in a kind of cause and effect, for whether one statement corresponds to the other and is a successful answer is not decided by the regularity of its actual occurrence. On the other hand, it is also not a matter of a coherence of steps of discourse following from logical or axiological laws. A logical conclusion, for instance, is not an answer to the previous propositions, even if the syllogism is spoken with divided roles. Nor is a reply, in practice, a pure following of a law. And why not? Because a question, apart from certain special cases, allows for more than one answer. And even where the answer is reduced to yes or no, the possibility still remains of evading or refusing to give an answer... (pp. 16-17)

Waldenfels’ earlier account of response and responsivity as being occasioned by an “event” can be seen as now cast into the terminology of speech-acts and communicative action. In this context, the question embodies the transgressive event or even the “sting” of the alien in our sphere of “ownness.” The event, the question, *provokes* a response or rather, an answer. But the nature of this answer, even if it is just silence, is reducible neither to the contextual sense-making of intentionality nor to the predeterminations of logic or reason. Like other examples of *Widerfahrnis*, this question affects us in a way that does not follow a prescriptive logic, whether this logic is labelled as narrative, propositional or discursive. Its effect and consequences are instead radically contingent, while at the same time displaying a number of general characteristics. Notably, in explaining these general characteristics of the answer, Waldenfels returns to the vocabulary of the other, since speech acts are directed to an overtly delimited human other, one who addresses us in a question. (At the same time, however, this interaction is certainly not devoid of that which is “alien”):

In the call of the Other which breaks the purposive circle of intentionality as much as the regulative circle of communication, the alien emerges *in actu*. This kind of call or *Anspruch*, as I would say in German, means two things at once: an appeal that is directed *at someone* and a claim or pretension *to something*. Peculiar to the call of the Other is the fact that both forms of *Anspruch*, i.e., appeal and claim, are intertwined. In the call that I receive, there is something that is demanded from me... (2011, p. 37)

The question, then, has at least two meanings simultaneously. It is at once a “claim,” an assertion that something is the case, or more specifically, is rightly one’s or another’s own. What is “claimed” in any question, of course, is an answer or the questioner’s implied entitlement to a response. As Waldenfels points out, even no answer is a kind of answer. At the same time, the question or questioner’s act is one of appeal; it is a kind of request or even demand, an attempt to “arouse” or persuade in the person being asked a positive, sympathetic or helpful response. The question “excuse me: Do you have the time?” appeals to another’s access to the time, without making its claim over another’s report on the time explicit. Generally, the response to this question or request is to the implied claim over another’s time and information regarding the current point-in-time: to “give” the time to another.

Waldenfels develops his account of questioning and communicative action largely as a counterpoint to that of Jürgen Habermas, whose theory of communicative rationality mobilizes its own version of the “claim” or “*Anspruch*” in the form of the “*Geltungsanspruch*,” or “validity claim.” Like Waldenfels, Habermas believes that when we ask a question or provide a response, we mean more than what we actually say. According to Habermas’ communicative rationality or his “theory of communicative action,” any “claim” is in some way always *also* a claim to validity. Habermas defines three dimensions of validity. What is said, he explains, can be judged in terms of: 1) its theoretical truth (i.e., does it correspond to reality?); 2) its normative rightness (i.e., does it fit with society’s values?); and 3) subjective sincerity (i.e., does the person mean it?). From Waldenfels’ perspective, these dimensions and the “rationality” they imply, constitute a kind of order. This is an order and rationality that serves the purpose of classifying what is said and how it is to be judged. However, we already know that Waldenfels’ interest is in vulnerabilities and moments of *disorder*, rather than in their maintenance or reinforcement. Consequently, he points out that like any other rationality or order, Habermas’ communicative rationality relies for its justification on something that is outside of communication and rational, truthful speech itself. Speaking specifically of communicative action, Waldenfels writes:

the establishment of a communicative field no more takes place by communicative arrangement than is the constitution of a country itself introduced in conformity with the constitution and compliance integrated into the articles of the constitution. The foundation of an order is an event that does not function as a part of the order that it makes possible. (2011, p. 40-41)

The validity and rationality of the question, claim or *Anspruch*, then, is based on something that is outside of the realm of communicative rationality itself. A statement, like a founding constitutional document, relies on something outside of itself (a lifeworld context, a dialog, a revolution or at least an election result) for its legitimacy or justification.

But the question then arises: How is it that Waldenfels can speak of his own “responsive rationality”? If any rationality appeals to something outside of itself, how can there be a rationality or logic of response –one that presumably governs how response can or does occur? This can be said to be possible because the logic or rationality described by Waldenfels is *negative* in nature –in the sense that it refuses distinctions, and emphasizes the limitations and indeterminacy of the response: “It is a rationality,” Waldenfels says, that “arises from responsivity itself” (2011 p. 39). This logic or rationality is characterized by four key aspects: “singularity,” “deferment,” “asymmetry” and a refusal of the distinction between “facts and norms” (see: 2011 pp. 39-42). The event that leads to a response, Waldenfels says, is *experienced* as singular. This does not mean that it happens only once in the realm of actual or possible events; instead, “singularity” has to do with how the event “deviate[s] from the familiar and inaugurate[s] another way of seeing, thinking and acting” (2011, p. 39). That the singularity of the event is understood in terms of what it leads to or inaugurates is also a part of the deferred character of responsivity. It is only afterwards, and in terms of what follows that the responsive significance of an event becomes tangible. As Waldenfels says, “the call only becomes a call in the response which it... precedes” (p. 42). But by this time, the event has already receded behind the response, and it is recognizable only by what it has entrained (as suggested in Waldenfels’ original term for deferral, *Nachträglichkeit*; literally a “carrying behind” of something). This temporal “unevenness” is in turn part of the asymmetrical character of question and response. Call and response, as Waldenfels says, “do not converge.” Unlike a FAQ, where the answers are available ready-made, a response is *created*, arising in and through the call: “We invent our response; but we do not invent that to which we are responding.” And this, Waldenfels continues, “gives weight to our speaking and acting” (p. 42). And finally, this same logic suggests the entwinement of fact and norms. Asking someone if they “have the time” creates the normative obligation for a response (keeping in mind that no response at all is also a response); and it simultaneously is about a matter of fact (the current time). To try to take away either the normative or factual from this such a question and a response would deprive each of its character as an act of speech; it would no longer be question or answer.

Being Online

So what does this all mean for the theme of this special issue, “Being Online?” In the books referenced in this piece, Waldenfels occasionally offers asides in which he highlights the relevance of his points for contemporary conditions of technical mediation. For example, in *Phenomenology of the Alien*, Waldenfels refers to claims regarding the computer’s capacity for “human” or artificial intelligence in connection with his themes of *Widerfahrnis* and responsivity: “Therefore,” he says, “we should not only ask the habitual question about what a computer can or cannot do, but rather query about what may or may not happen to it, what it responds to and does not respond to” (2011, p. 47). *Widerfahrnis*, in other words, is not a question of the registration and processing of sensory inputs, but rather, is dependent on being able to engage in or undergo an “experience” –one to which a response is possible. In considering the phenomenon of attention in the same text, Waldenfels observes that experiences of attention have “a special relationship to technology... and media systems.” “Electronic screens,” he says “are our everyday *apparatuses of attention* and contribute to the constitution of reality and not just to the transfer of meaning” (2011, p. 64; emphasis in original).

Although he does not delve into this special relationship further –or present a sustained discussion of technical mediation elsewhere in translation– Waldenfels *does* turn his attention to technical media periodically in some of his many works not yet translated. A particularly striking passage or section is titled “Telepresence” from the aforementioned *Displacements of place and time* (2009). It is with a consideration of this passage, translated at some length below, that this overview concludes:

What would a medium capable of mediating the immediate look like? ...The problem, actually, does not lie in *telepresence*, which amplifies our own possibilities to the level where distance is abolished; but in *tele-absence*, which withdraws from its own access. The withdrawal of the alien, which is also entrenched in our perception, strikes me with more force than the resistance of the alien, which is something I can defend myself against. With the latter, it is only a question of possessing greater or lesser force. But this is not the case for withdrawal, which is like a shadow that cannot be grasped. (p. 110; emphases in original)

Waldenfels is saying, in short, that what is important in technological mediation, whether by audio, video or text, is not so much the alien’s sting as its withdrawal. He continues:

Every attempt at access dispels it rather than bringing it closer, just as Orpheus forces Eurydice into renewed death and absence through the power of his glance. Resistance can awaken its own energies, but withdrawal exceeds my own possibilities in that it transforms them into lived *impossibilities*... All technical artifice runs up against an inner border: If the alien *were* there, it would not be what it is. Even a video camera, which can not only register our voice and breathing, but even the lifting of the eyelids or the creasing of the brow, would fail when it comes to the glance that is more than something that is seen [or recorded], or to the voice that is more than something that is heard [or taped] – because voice and glance disrupt, incite, interrupt. Here technical media run up against the limit of representability, without being able to represent this limit themselves ... (pp. 110-111; translation by reviewer)

It is the body, and its simultaneously self-reference and self-withdrawal, that Waldenfels says lies beyond the limit of representability. As suggested above, in its reference and self-reference, the body is not simply an object or even just a “living” object, with motions, sounds and surfaces to be registered, lit, and recorded. From involuntary movements of breathing or the creasing of the brow to the dryness of one’s mouth or the sleep in one’s eyes, the body is an inextricable mix of active and passive meanings. Technologies of telepresence, such as the audio/video transmission enabled by *Skype* or *FaceTime* do not so much capture these as they refract, disturb, delay and deflect them. Waldenfels of course does not reference these technologies directly, but he speaks of these possibilities for mediation in saying: “When I hear my voice on a tape or see my face on a video I get into a situation where nearness and remoteness are entangled and where all direct reflection is disturbed by a sort of deflection” (Waldenfels, 2006, p. 77). In this context, the palpability of another’s glance, the proximity of their voice or even the pallor of their skin are not so much diminished as they are entwined in an entanglement of nearness and remoteness that is variably exaggerated or attenuated.

New technologies of simulation and mediation always seem to be trying to cross the border of representability and to overcome the limits of representation. As I have argued elsewhere, such technologies often try to overcome their representational limitations through an additive or accumulative logic of “more;” by adding more power and more capabilities to their repertoire (Friesen, 2011): more pixels for screens and cameras, greater frequency response for sound, even haptic and holographic enhancements. The final result, however, is generally a reinforcement of the power and intervention of the artifice itself. Under such circumstances, I argue, “less” may actually be actually “more.” What escapes the cumulative, technophilic logic of “more” is that which borders on the absent, that which withdraws or is concealed particularly when the scene is fully lit, and the panoply of instrumentation for capture or enhancement are all in place. Or as Waldenfels observes of technology and technique generally,

Just as the most primordial experience is permeated by moments of the unknown and unmotivated, so too the phenomena of experience are from the start marked by a genuine phenomenotechnology and somatechnology. Technology, which has for a very long time –despite all the contemporary lamentations about alienation through technology– been regarded as an extension of the sphere of ownness, now proves more and more to be a source of alienation of its own kind. (2011, p. 6)

Despite its profound and challenging complexity, Waldenfels’ phenomenology of the alien, offer rich insights and possibilities to phenomenological readers and researchers about technology, the body and much more. The latest book to be added to his modest English language corpus, *The Philosophy of the Alien*, presents an exemplary point of entry to this way of thinking. However, with Waldenfels’ terse and often cryptic formulations, supplementing it with some of his other translated work can also be most rewarding.

References:

- Friesen, N. (2011). “Less is More: A Response to Ihde, Rosenberger, Borgmann, Barney and Sørensen.” *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 15(3; Fall, 2011) 229-234. Accessed from: http://normfriesen.info/files/friesen_response.pdf
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge.
- Waldenfels, B. (1996). *Order in the twilight*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Waldenfels, B. (2003). From Intentionality to Responsivity. In R. Bernet & D.J. Martino (eds.), *Phenomenology Today: The Schuwer Spep Lectures, 1998-2002*. Pittsburg: Duquesne University. Accessed from: http://learningspaces.org/files/Waldenfels_1999.pdf
- Waldenfels, B. (2007). *The Question of the Other*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Waldenfels, B. (2009). *Ortsverschiebungen, Zeitverschiebungen: Modi leibhafter Erfahrung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Waldenfels, B. (2011). *Phenomenology of the alien: Basic concepts*. Evanston: Northwestern UP.