

## ***Stance: Ideas About Emotion, Style, And Meaning For The Study Of Expressive Culture***

Harris M. Berger  
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### **Reviewed by David Jackson**

Something about phenomenology makes it appear to be an outdated style of philosophy and critical discourse. Phenomenology seems to have a whiff of nostalgia, or even archaism about it. Increasingly, however, scholars have become more interested in phenomenological approaches that examine and account for how subjects act in the world and how relational experiences inform subjective understanding. Harris M. Berger's *Stance: Ideas about Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture* is a significant and important contribution to scholarship based in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. More significantly, *Stance* presents scholars and researchers working in the field of sound and improvisation with fresh and interesting approaches for examining and studying the elements involved in creative musical practices. Elements such as practice, meaning, affect, value, and experience are all brought to bear on the stances that produce expressive culture. Though often complex and tied to the specialized terminology of phenomenology, *Stance* is a book that is not just for sympathetic phenomenological critics. Berger handles his material so carefully and clearly that most scholars will gain something of substance from his work. Berger writes that phenomenology offers no miracle for understanding the world, but that it will help in the same way that most theoretical models do: "by revealing the shapes and forms in a domain of knowledge, positing study objects, and sensitizing researchers to phenomena that they may find in the field [ . . . ] framing the ethnographer's assumptions and observations, contextualizing the ways in which interview questions are phrased, and informing the researcher's interpretation of her interviews and texts" (xix). Rather than being a way of thinking about research, phenomenology illustrates how to actively engage with research materials in novel and unexpected ways.

Berger is a professor of performance studies at Texas A & M and works in the fields of ethnomusicology, folklore studies, popular music studies, and performance studies. He has previously written about phenomenology and the Ohio metal, jazz, and rock scenes in *Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience*. This work tackled the problem of how musicians create meaningful music through an engagement with sound. In *Stance*, Berger has written a formidable book about how meaning functions through music to move us, affect us, and reveal ourselves—in relation to each other as composers, interpreters, audiences, and listeners.

Of particular interest to the study of improvisation is Berger's discussion of practice and its relation to performance, the performance's relationship to audiences, and the subsequent reception of the performance. Berger states at the outset of *Stance* that he has two goals in mind for the reader: the first is to seriously attend to phenomenology as a critical method to understand affect, style, and meaning; the second is to elaborate and clarify how phenomenology can be used by humanities scholars to understand and interpret texts, whether a song, a poem, or a performance. Berger writes that his focus is "on structures of lived experience and the culturally specific ways in which people make meaning by fitting expressive forms into the context of those structures" (5). This maneuver eases the confusion we may sometimes feel when trying to account for and interpret the meanings associated with the social practice of expressive culture.

Through his careful treatment of obscure and difficult material, Berger exceeds his goals and explains the experiential aspects of social practice understood and interpreted from various viewpoints. His approach is inclusive and ranges through folklore, stand up comedy, the sound of metal guitar, homophobia, and many other significant, relevant, and illuminating examples. It is to Berger's credit that he deals with very complex material without straying or rambling from his stated intentions. He repeatedly analyzes and develops the same examples to illustrate how his treatment of the phenomenological method has subtly transformed our thinking about meaning, affect, style, and experience and their impact on the structure of lived experience. These elaborations go to the heart of the phenomenological method and how it can be used to examine the world.

Berger's notion of "stance" refers to the value-based, affective, and stylistic attributes that one adopts about some "thing," such as a piece of music or a performance. How one grapples with the meaning of some aspect of expressive culture (text, performance, practice) and brings it into one's own experience for interpretation forms the basis of taking a stance in and towards expressive culture. Berger contends that understanding meaning is complicated and

that there are a number of ways for researchers to investigate how texts and social practices signify. This hermeneutic process engages with how meaning is constructed and interpreted by different groups and with how those groups make use of meaning in their larger cultural and social contexts. The study of experience itself is often seen as an abstract, vague, and imprecise domain for research, but Berger insists on the importance of experiencing texts (whether music, television, performance, or sitting in a coffee shop) in relation to ourselves. Berger writes, "When placed before a reader, a viewer, or a listener, the text does not spring whole cloth into his or her (let us say her) experience. People engage with texts to make them meaningful and must actively bring them into their lived experience. In other words, the meaning that scholars seek to study is not the product of texts; it is the product of *texts in experience*" (ix). Scholars of expressive culture are often concerned with what texts mean for different groups, and research and its explanation often directly involve understanding how people go about interpreting their experiences. Reflection on a text in experience is both simple and difficult: simple, because perceiving and reflecting on the textual experience is something that everyone does in every day life; complex because it is very difficult to explain through reflection what a concept actually is and how meaning is practically interpreted in experience.

Berger notes that such a reflexive perspective is an uncomfortable position for a critic to adopt, as it brings research into the personal realm and seems to contradict the objectivist approach we are often encouraged to take about our research. Phenomenological research engages with the world from a subjective position, however, and proposes that the body is the first access to the world. This world can be empirically understood and approached through a number of techniques, such as interviews, observations, self-reflective analysis, reading fiction, watching a movie, talking about a television show, experiencing sound, playing music, practicing scales, and many other elements that make up the parts of expressive culture. Another philosopher working with subjective bodies in the world, Max van Manen, summarizes the phenomenological process and its significance to being and practice as follows:

Phenomenology formatively informs, reforms, transforms, and performs the relation between being and practice. Informatively, phenomenological studies make possible thoughtful advice and consultation. Reformatively, phenomenological texts make a demand on us, changing us in what we may become. Transformatively, phenomenology has practical value in that it reaches into the depth of our being, prompting a new becoming. Performatively, phenomenological reflection contributes to the practice of tact. And pre-formatively, phenomenological experience gives significance to the meanings that influence us before we are even aware of their formative value. ("Phenomenology of Practice" 26)

For Berger, and phenomenological critics generally, expressive practices are transformations of the actual world and present the researcher with ways to interpret the world through our experiences. This allows the researcher to find and make meanings out of experiences that are transformative, producing meaning and value for the person interpreting the encounter with a social text.

"Experience" is potentially a fuzzy and incoherent concept, but phenomenology can clarify and help explain how experience operates. One way of understanding experience is through its relational aspects. Creation or art, to follow Nicholas Bourriard's formulation in *Relational Aesthetics*, "is a state of encounter" in which works are no longer concerned with the formation of imagined reality, but become "ways of living and models of action within the existing real" (13). Imagination opens space between people to reflect, think, question, and suggest possibilities that critically engage with other ways of being. Artists or musicians record, exchange, and dialogue with these realities to make and remake new realities. Art is hopefully about the negotiable potential and possibility that are manifest in the dialogue about becoming. Experience does not occur without a relationship between all of the elements that inform and make up that experience.

By focusing on lived experience, the phenomenological critic situates practice in the spaces where subjects experience, encounter, and respond to the world and its objects in the processes of becoming. What I want to draw out here is that for most phenomenologically-based researchers, understanding depends upon a reflective empirical approach that is largely "pathic," or relational. This empirical approach creates examples and varieties of lived experience, communicated through narrative, stories, and other methods of expression. "Stance" is thus fundamentally an idea that forges relations between a person and an object, producing an effect (and affect), which itself is a quality of stance that engages in relational qualities. The pathic is a way of understanding the world that is "not primarily gnostic, cognitive, intellectual, technical—but rather that is, indeed pathic: relational, situational, corporeal, temporal, actional" (van Manen, *Inquiry: Empirical Methods* 20). This pathic understanding of the world situates the body as the first place for knowing and accessing the world, the first site of the response to the world and the relation between ourselves and others, between experiences and objects that contribute to our being and becoming.

This notion of relational, situated knowledge is a crucial insight for those studying improvisation and its ambiguous relation to social texts. Improvisation, unlike most practices, depends on what is often perceived as an ambiguous set of rules, implicitly understood and acted on in ways that vary from situation to situation. This poses a unique problem, as each gesture performed in the improvisation creates a unique stance on the text that is being created in the moment. More than just “knowing the rules to break them,” improvisational practice ultimately performs a “rich dialectic of agency [. . .] constraining and enabling how [the] context of the practices of others shapes the stance of performance” (Berger 103). Sounds and gestures, as well as their acceptance or rejection, become part of the text of experience. Depending on how the relationships in the improvisation play out, the performer’s stance can be unclear, or even fumbling and bad, if practice and training has not been taken up before the performance.

“Practice” is a key concept for understanding *Stance* and has significant ramifications for scholars interested in improvisation and how improvisation is experienced by audiences. Berger is quite specific about how he defines practice. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, he defines practice as “always both agentive and shaped by situated and large-scale social contexts; that agency and structure are, in Giddens’s terms, a ‘duality’; and that present practice is both constrained and enabled by the context of past practices and the anticipation of future ones” (147). Practice occurs within received cultural forms that are sedimented and known through repetition and habit, but are constituted for audiences in their repetitive performance, reception, and enactment. The phenomenological method explores all the varieties of lived experience as practiced and learned by different agents through repetition. Practice attempts to “open up possibilities for creating formative relations between being and acting, between who we are and how we act, between thoughtfulness and tact” (van Manen, “Phenomenology of Practice” 11).

The most challenging and rewarding part of Berger’s book explicitly applies phenomenology and the idea of stance to the dynamics of ideology and power. Berger draws upon Samuel Todes’s work discussing bodies in the world, and on Antonio Gramsci’s theories of praxis, to elaborate the idea of power as a phenomenon that both achieves and dominates things. Power influences all action, and subjects are situated explicitly in social worlds that pre-exist and create their subjectivity: to be a subject is to be subjected to a social world of forces in both a positive and negative sense. The subject’s stance-on-power is how one approaches and interprets this field of power. Berger writes that this stance does not fall under the simple categories of “dominant” or “subordinate,” but engages with the “affective and stylistic relationships to one’s own actions within a particular situation and at a particular social position in a world of sedimented structures of domination and subordination” (115). Berger illustrates this sense of power through an inspired reading that weaves together the banal situation comedies *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Home Improvement* with abstract expressionism and Jackson Pollock’s drip painting technique. This diversity of stances, and the ways in which various audiences receive and interpret them, has actual consequences, too complex for Berger to completely unravel. Turning to activism and social movements, Berger challenges the reader to further explore the implications of the politics of expressive culture and to fully determine how the ensembles of stance, interpretation, and expressive culture situate social agents in the world of power, and subsequently, how social transformation may be possible. Achieving this potential transformation requires a stance of not merely “walking the walk,” according to Berger, but “walking the walk effectively” (131).

*Stance* is an extremely dense and challenging book, but one that should not be overlooked by anyone interested in how meaning is experienced. How we meet expressive culture and make sense of it are obviously important to the work we do as scholars of culture. Berger treats complicated concepts with deft analysis and clear and detailed examples: what seems opaque at first will often yield productive, critical insights and reveal what may have previously been overlooked or under-examined aspects regarding the work of creativity.

## Works Cited

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