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Guardians of the Lifeworld: Phenomenological Dwelling and Resistance in an Age of Acceleration

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Abstract

This paper draws inspiration from phenomenology and Marvel Entertainment's Guardians of the Galaxy (GotG) to elevate and guard the practices of scholarship, as one response to the encroachment and infiltration of large language models (LLMs) and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into academic knowledge work, thinking in particular. LLMs and GenAI may offer to accelerate labourious knowledge work, and gild with kudos those who thus leverage it, for example in compiling entire literature reviews on demand. We contend that automating aspects of scholarship impoverishes the necessarily relational, embodied and ethical activity of scholars. In this AI-infiltrated era, we present a novel (and fun!) phenomenological stimulant for delegates to the networked learning conference. Rather than the just the usual canonical philosophical writers, our inspiration draws upon some of the main characters of GotG. We argue that GotG may be encountered, attending to their narrative arcs: their dialogue, gesture, sacrifice and relation. These facets, as they play out in moments of grief and generosity, etc. can help us to reflect on our own attempts at scholarly practice through current GenAI-troubled tensions. These lived tensions, as they may texture networked collaborative academic work, are briefly elaborated through four fragments: the disappeared voice, the stillness that registers as absence, the question that got automated and, the speed that erases process. These fragments share a flavour of what the Guardians may address. Brief depictions and insights from the Guardians we include are informed by repeat viewing of the GotG movie trilogy and fan wikis. We begin with Star-Lord, a figure of fragmentation and longing, of disconnection and yet drawing repeatedly back from the brink through music and the call of what matters. We introduce Gamora, as guarding the possibility of ethics amid torrid interminable violence. For us, Rocket and Nebula guard the possibility of healing without erasure. Groot and Mantis guard the quiet forms of knowing. Drax guards the fragility of interpretation. We invite delegates to join us in drawing playful resilience and hope from our GotG interpretive companions and celebrate the freedom to deliberate unplugged inception into scholarly discourse, to guard the conditions of thought and thinking itself.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Large Language Models, Insight Cultivators, postdigital, scholarship, technology, pharmakon, collaboration, hope, Education in times of crisis, fandom, Higher Education,

Introduction

In an era where Large Language Models (LLMs), also known as generative AIs (GenAI), automation, and optimisation increasingly mediate education, research, and knowledge work in general, what does it mean to protect the very act of human thinking? Not the impoverished notions of thinking, as *cognition*, *information processing*, as *efficient output*, etc., but thinking as a *mode of dwelling*, a way of remaining present to the unfolding of meaning as it emerges through relation and *being-in-the-world*.

These may seem like abstract concerns, but they reverberate through daily knowledge work practices; as collaborators navigate tools and platforms that may now be characterised as not just *postdigital*, but AI-infiltrated, attempting reflective inquiry amidst demands for higher productivity and speed (de Leon et al., 2025; Goetz, 2024; Gourlay, 2024). Formerly, Ray Land (2006) observed an acceleration, a compression in time, “fast time that drives out slow time”, as he styled it. However, in our era, as Gourlay (2024) observes, GenAIs alter the embodied experience of academic writing, disconnecting students and researchers from the gestures, hesitations, and material practices through which thinking itself unfolds. Chomsky et al. (2023) warn that machine learning systems trade merely in probabilities rather than engaging with meaning, truth, or the principle of non-

contradiction that grounds human reasoning (see also, Guest, et al., 2025). For us, questions arising from AI infiltration of scholarship are about human experience and coping: what is it like, as student or academic, to dwell where AI has attained hegemony over many aspects of knowledge work, and what may be plausible ways of coping with the resultant dissonance? The scholarly members of neoliberal, possibly “unbundled” (Swinerton, et al., 2024), universities, already experience fragmentation navigating video calls, digital collaborative authoring projects, and distributed communication channels (Gourlay, 2024; Healey-Benson et al., 2024), our soul-body never quite settled anywhere, prone to a passages of oscillation between being (t)here and (no)where (Enriquez-Gibson, 2016; Johnson, 2024). Ethical vigilance piques in the moment we pause before accepting an algorithmic suggestion, perhaps when typing, that feels too smooth, too certain. Relationally, brilliance may seem to emanate from the haloed scholar who can automate everything, but may have forgotten when they were last affected by a single text or word. Something momentous may be shifting in *how we live, work and think together*, how we remain present at the inception and subsequent development of ideas when AI is at our fingertips.

This paper offers a phenomenological vivication to anyone attempting scholarly practice in AI-infiltrated days. We call not for the rejection of technology, but a refusal to let the relational, embodied, and ethical dimensions of thinking and learning together be eroded by systems that reward rapidity and conflate output for scholarship. We still agree with Goodfellow’s (2013, p. 69) vision of *scholarship* which values, “critical reflection, the cumulative aggregation of knowledge and understanding, distinct modes of operation relating to evidence and the warranting of its reliability, and the ethic of enquiry as a primary motivation”. For those committed to sustaining Goodfellow’s vision in the pursuit of exploring networked learning, we advocate phenomenology as offering a way of attending to the textures of experience that may evaporate when collaboration and writing are augmented through automation, and co-presence is ultra-finessed until its electronic chimera becomes the most we can expect. For networked learning scholarship, the GenAI clamour and impact we are living through as a community are not merely contextual. GenAI, and accompanying hype, strikes at the heart of what the field seeks to understand. Networked learning research has long attended to how meaning emerges through connection, collaboration, and distributed presence; thus the arrival of GenAI-mediated tools forces a reckoning. Networked learning stock-in-trade topics are, as is widespread in academia, mediated by systems that are honed for efficiency, as *productivity* tools, rather than prioritising human attunement, trust formation in digital spaces, emergent understanding through protracted dialogue, or the relational dimensions of joint inquiry and emancipation. We argue that phenomenology, in this context, is not merely a philosophical confection, it is a methodological lifeline. As such, we suggest a link with Felicitas MacGilchrist’s 2024 keynote in Malta, which, inspired by Andreotti (2025), sought to encourage delegates with hope (see also Dohn et al., 2026).

This paper shares inspiration, and light relief, from the Guardians of the Galaxy (GotG), the flawed, fractured, unlikely protectors from the Marvel Studios films (acknowledging first appearance in comic book form 1976). We are not alone in seeking creative inspiration through narrative: Gidiotis and Hrastinski (2025) present three lenses for the analysis of education fiction, and our work may be thought of as sitting within their category of narrative and rhetorical mechanics. We take the Guardians up as interpretive companions to explore how phenomenology might help networked learning researchers guard what matters: the fragile conditions under which thinking together remains possible. The sections that follow establish phenomenology as a mode of guardianship, clarify how the Guardians function as *insight cultivators*, and then trace the tensions they help us name within scholarly practice.

Guardianship: Dwelling, Enframing, and the Pharmakon

To think of *phenomenology as guardian* is not to summon a system of fixed concepts or inherited traditions that must be preserved for their own sake. It is dwelling (Heidegger’s *wohnen*) with dispositions that resist closure, to stay close to the kernel of experience, to hold open a space where meaning can still arise slowly, haltingly, and on its own terms. For phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, meaning arises through the body’s entanglement with the world, in gestures, silences, hesitations, and the folds of everyday life (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Meaning is not something we possess but something we enter, appearing only when we remain with experience long enough for it to speak back. Understanding somewhat unfolds through involvement, and a kind of *staying with* that allows what is hidden to show itself over time.

For Heidegger, *being* is too elusive to be processed or delivered but obliquely inhabited, patiently, attentively, and without guarantee (Heidegger, 1971). His reflections on technology warn of a drift towards enframing (*Gestell*), a way of seeing in which the world becomes merely sortable and *available*, its textures reduced to function (Heidegger, 1977). In this mode, everything, thinking included, risks becoming standing-reserve (*Bestand*),

resources to be optimised and extracted. For researchers, enframing manifests in the pressure to produce outputs, to collaborate efficiently, to automate the messy, slow work of sense-making and attunement.

Stiegler extends this concern, reminding us that our tools are never neutral: the technologies we build to extend ourselves can also begin to separate us from what matters most (Stiegler, 1998/2010). He describes this paradox in terms of *pharmakon*: that which is both remedy and poison. The same AI tool that accelerates a literature review may also hollow-out the slow labour of reading; and the same digital platform we collaborate over may fragment our attention and load our scholarly dwelling together with dissonance.

The aforementioned thinkers are not invoked for authority as much as for the atmosphere they evoke. Each offers a way of remaining open to the unruly and fragile conditions of being, conditions that resist clarity and ease but make meaning-making possible. Together, they suggest that to guard thinking is not to protect it from change, but to protect the conditions under which it can still unfurl: slowness, ambiguity, embodiment, relation. We argue that this same atmosphere can be helpfully found (however unexpectedly) within the narrative arcs of the Guardians. Not as fixed allegories, but as gestures or fragments of a larger question that continues to press on those of us working in learning and inquiry: what is worth protecting, and who may we become to protect it?

Reading The Guardians Phenomenologically

We make no apology for eschewing empiricism in treating our topic. Instead, leveraging what De Schryver (2023, p. 18) asserts is phenomenology's power, "not merely to critique the real but... to *surpass* it". Our orientation of resistance is through imaginative redescription, and of staying with the felt textures of experience – a path towards phenomenological reduction, to conjure and share what AI-infiltrated scholarship is like. Here, the Guardians are attended to as interpretive companions, each offering a fragment of what it might mean to dwell thoughtfully while floundering in a tide of acceleration. We link this approach with van Manen's (2023) emphasis on phenomenology as a practice of interpretive attentiveness, an active, thoughtful expressing of humanity through reflective writing that evokes meaning for both author and reader.

The character readings offered here are drawn from multiple layers of encounter. These include repeated viewings of Gunn's GotG movie trilogy, paying special attention to moments of dialogue, gesture, sacrifice, and relation that shape their narrative arcs. We are also led by online directorial and fan commentary, notably the creative interpretations of fan wikis (e.g., <https://www.fandom.com/universe/marvel>), and by critical reviews, cultural readings, and narrative summaries. Following Jenkins' (2006) work on participatory culture, we treat these sources not as empirical datasets nor as scholarly authorities but as part of the wider lifeworld in which *figuration* circulates and meaning is collaboratively shaped. We also assert due homage to the rarified new literacies honed through the huge collective corpus framed by the galaxy of mostly anonymous collaborating fan-fiction authors (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Our orientation to sources echoes Healey-Benson's doctoral study, which took up metaphor as methodological device, using figuration as "a poetic phenomenology where imaginative redescription becomes a way of seeing" (Healey-Benson, 2023, p. 98; see also van Manen, 2023; Lakoff and Johnson, 2008). Informants' metaphors were used to access kernels of lived meaning. In this paper, GotG themselves become metaphorical figures, not to be decoded, but to be dwelt with. They are narrative vessels through which tensions, pressures, and quiet resistance within scholarly cultures may come into view.

The Guardians, as narrative vessels, are not idealised, nor are they mapped to any philosophical system. They function as a variant on van Manen's (2023) *insight cultivator*: evocative characters shaped by loss and repair, loyalty and contradiction, grief and generosity. They are vignettes, figures of fracture and care. In reading their struggles, we may encounter our own, and notice how to remain *vulnerable* within the machinic, *ethical* within the compromised, *whole* within the scarred and discombobulated. Their presence is offered here not as answer, but as orientation: a way of guarding the possibility of thought itself. As Plato writes in the Seventh Letter, learning does not arrive through transmission alone, it also occurs through proximity and a shared dwelling with the matter at hand. After sustained encounter and life lived together, "suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one soul by a flame that leaps to it from another, and thereafter sustains itself" (Plato, Seventh Letter, 341c, trans. Harward). Heidegger also draws on this image in his 1929 address honouring Husserl, where he suggests that genuine understanding emerges not from *explanation* but from a slow ignition between beings who remain with a question long enough for it to speak back.

In this spirit, we do not seek to decode GotG or translate fiction into philosophical proof. It is simply a staying with the characters as interpretive companions: flawed, fractured, affectively alive. Through their arcs, we may trace something of what it means to keep thought open. Not because GotG are exemplary in that, but they remind us that success in guarding our humanity rarely looks neat. It stutters, aches and laughs together, perhaps in orange

hanfod.NL socks and beanies (Healey-Benson, 2024). In this sense, the work here is witness. A way of typifying phenomenology's offer to turn us to what is felt, sensed, and what may be bypassed in the rush to produce and deliver. The Guardians are not the answer, but they may help us guard the question.

This paper therefore moves between registers: the *fictional* Guardians' narrative arcs, the *philosophical* phenomenological traditions of embodiment, ethics, and dwelling, and the *lived tensions* already present in networked scholarship. Thus we weave insights from collaborative research practice, particularly within sub-communities such as hanfod.NL, the intuit indicating what might be at stake. We invoke the Guardians to indicate the lifeworld this paper seeks to protect: the fragile conditions which cultivate thinking together when strident meta-discourses demand ever more efficiency (Levinsen & Nielsen, 2012).

If phenomenology is, at heart, a way of attending to experience without reductivism, then the Guardians, albeit intergalactically fictional, offer something of a constellation. GotG narratives, especially when superpowers are unleashed, may be spectacular, but the tensions the characters carry are universal, emerging through gesture, dialogue, and relationality, rather than through representational data. What does it mean to protect the conditions of thinking, not only through intellect, but through sacrifice, awkwardness, silence, and repair? What does it mean to continue showing up, even when all-but strangled with self-doubt, fractured, mechanised or misread? We argue that each Guardian offers a different contour of guardianship, and when read through a phenomenological lens, these figures function as sites of imaginative redescription (van Manen, 2023), inviting us to look again at what it means to *think with care*. We invite the reader to trace for what resonates and consider where, in their own practice, these tensions might also occur, not as generalisable findings, but as recognisable structures of lived experience.

To enter this exploration, Table 1 was framed to help to trace and coalesce what might be felt, and rescued, from within these characters. Each one offers a different contour of guardianship, and when read through a phenomenological lens, we offer their invitation to look again at what it means to think with care in a world increasingly shaped by speed, automation, and the forgetting of feeling.

In Table 1 we seek not to finalise meaning, but in sharing here, invite the reader to scan and feel for what resonates, to consider consonance within their own practice. From here, we might return to the characters not only as figures, but as companions in our own attempts to remain open, attuned, and intact. These are not archetypes of any kind, especially not *moral* perfection, but broken yet *becoming* figures who dwell in the messy middle.

Table 1: Guardians of the Galaxy as Figures of Phenomenological Resistance — A conceptual constellation tracing lived tensions, protective gestures, and fragile possibilities within accelerated times.

Character	Core Dispositions	Phenomenological Trace	What They Guard	The Networked Learning Question
Star-Lord (Peter Quill)	Nostalgic, fragmented, reactive, half-rooted	Heideggerian thrownness; longing for grounded being; identity stretched across ontologies	The possibility of coherence in a fragmented world; the ache for home; the risk and resilience of remembering	How do we maintain scholarly coherence when networked collaboration fragments our attention across platforms, time zones, and competing demands?
Gamora	Ethical, disciplined, wounded, fiercely loyal	Levinasian responsibility; care within violence; ethics as resistance	The demand to remain ethical inside morally compromised systems; the defence of relational trust	How do we preserve ethical deliberation in collaborative spaces increasingly mediated by AI that offers "solutions" before we've fully grappled with the problem?
Rocket	Brilliant, sarcastic, emotionally armoured, mechanised	Stiegler's pharmakon; emotional displacement through technicity; cleverness as shield for ungrieved loss	The fragile threshold between control and contact; the danger of surviving without feeling	How do we protect from the vulnerability required for genuine collaborative learning?
Groot	Quiet, relational, sacrificial, pathically present	Merleau-Ponty's embodiment; silent knowing; the ontology of gesture	The care that lives in gesture, not explanation; the embodied presence that sustains relation when words fall short	How do we recognise & preserve and value forms of contribution in networked collaborations?
Drax	Literal, vengeful, emotionally exposed, awkward	Loss of metaphor and ambiguity; the flattening of meaning into literalism	The danger of losing interpretive nuance; the cost of clarity without ambiguity	How do we hold space for the ambiguity necessary for phenomenological inquiry?
Mantis	Naive, empathic, touch-oriented, sincere	Affective attunement; epistemology of touch; relational fragility	The possibility of feeling as knowledge; the courage of vulnerability in an age of abstraction	How do we...empathic attunement – space/time for...
Nebula	Armoured, fractured, reluctantly healing, quietly loyal	Posthuman reconstitution; trauma through technics; relational repair	The long labour of becoming again after violence; the difference between fixing and healing	How do we... AI tidies things up, losing key nuances, fragilities

What needs guarding in an age of acceleration

To practice scholarship well is not simply to follow method, nor is it to *solve*, but indeed to hold open a space where questions might emerge and speak back. It is to linger with ambiguity long enough that something as yet unknown may begin to form, and it is this space that we argue is narrowed with the incursion of AI-infused scholarship: tasks are optimised, writing scaffolded, refined, rewritten, faster than a single thought. Across

research and learning cultures, there is a growing sense that something intimate has been quietly displaced (Healey-Benson, 2025). Not only the collapsing of time or attention, or the chance to think slowly, but even loss of the very texture of thinking itself. What once required patient hesitation and lived involvement may be apparently drafted in less time than it took to type a few prompts. Where once we sat with our uncertainty, circling a phrase or returning to a fieldnote that refused to settle, we are handed instant synthetic synthesis, coherence, and even elegance with elan. The temptation to bypass difficulty may seem obvious if not obligatory, but simultaneously structurally hygienic and soulless.

For those committed to phenomenological inquiry this is not simply a matter of workflow, it is a philosophical disturbance. The conditions under which thought might arise, the tension, silence and attunement, are increasingly outsourced to systems that do not feel, hesitate, or care¹. Research risks becoming a pattern rather than a path. Writing risks becoming output rather than offering. Inquiry, once a dwelling, reduced to *deliverable*.

This is not a critique of technology in itself. Stiegler reminds us that “the pharmakon is at once what enables care to be taken and that of which care must be taken” (2013, p. 4). GotG Rocket’s brilliance as an engineer makes him invaluable, but his cynicism, sarcasm, and emotional avoidance suggest a cost. In the tension between protection and detachment, we feel the pharmakon’s sting. The same technics that offer safety risk severing him from his own capacity to feel. In this, he becomes a warning, not against technology, but against its unreflective absorption. Without that rhythm, friction, delay or awkwardness, thinking is thinned out too much. Phenomenology offers no simple solution or closure. It asks us to remain with the grain of experience, to notice how it folds, resists and shimmers, offering a quiet form of guardianship; a gentle refusal to surrender depth of thinking to the speed of systems, a way of remembering that knowledge is not only what is produced, but what is lived through, what is felt in fragments, what takes time to name, and may never be fully claimed.

Tensions in fragments of post-digital scholarship

Before turning to Guardians as interpretive companions, we note some tensions in the textures of post-digital scholarship that implicate networked learning’s core commitments. Each of the following four fragments represents a strain, if not breach, in the relational, dialogic conditions that networked learning theorists have identified as foundational (de Laat & Dohn, 2019; NLC et al., 2021). What appears as individual struggles with AI tools we present as disturbances in the collaborative, processual fabric of thinking-together that defines networked learning collaborative practice for staff and students. These fragments are not presented as empirical data to be analysed exhaustively, but as phenomenological moments through which we seek an unconcealing (*Unverborgenheit* in Heidegger’s definition of *truth*) of the textures, pressures, and interruptions of the contemporary networked scholarly lifeworld. We propose that, in the same way that existentialist scholars offer glimpses of pre-reflective lived experience, the following fragment work and GotG characterisation may function as a novel phenomenological method: our “Guardians of Thinking” in action.

Fragment 1: The Disappeared Voice

A scholar describes returning to their AI-edited draft. "The sentences were cleaner. The argument flowed better. But I couldn't find myself in it anymore. It was like someone had organised my desk so thoroughly I no longer knew why anything was where it was." Recent analyses of AI-mediated writing document this pattern: text that appears improved yet leaves authors unable to recognise their own thinking within it (de Leon et al., 2025). The pharmakon's double edge. Not error, slip or hallucination, but *estrangement*.

Fragment 2: The Stillness That Registers as Absence

Three cursors move across a shared document. One types rapidly. Another highlights and deletes. The third sits motionless in the margin. Present but not obviously producing. A colleague admits later, "I wanted to just sit with that paragraph. Let it breathe. But everyone else was moving forward and I felt like I was holding us back." De Leon et al. (2025) observe that AI systems increasingly mediate collaborative work through what they call black box models. The *process* of arriving at understanding becomes invisible. It is reduced to outputs that appear authoritative but offer no trace of the hesitation, revision, or dwelling that constitutes human thinking. What team, thinking of Belbin (2010), wants or needs a ‘plant’, a ponderer? GotG Groot's attuned presence struggles to

¹ The implications of admitting that machines have feelings, etc. and perhaps even rights, has been usefully debunked by Birhane et al. (2024).

register in spaces that privilege performativity, but their eventual interventions are astonishing. It is the still cursor that is noticed, becomes suspect.

Fragment 3: The Question That Was Automated Away

In a writing project meeting, someone raises an uncomfortable tension in the work. Before the conversation deepens, another suggests, "Why don't we ask the AI how to resolve this?" Moments later, they have a synthesised response. Clear, confident, complete. Privately, a team member messages: "We never actually worked through that tension, did we? We just... bypassed it." Drawing on Chomsky's critique, de Leon et al. (2025) warn that Large Language Models trade merely in probabilities without respecting the Principle of Non-contradiction that Aristotle identified as foundational to scientific inquiry. When research teams turn to AI to resolve a conceptual tension, they risk automating away the contradictions that might have deepened their thinking. They accept synthesis without having genuinely synthesised. GotG Gamora's ethical vigilance surfaces here: the recognition that efficiency sometimes means evading the difficult conversation that matters.

Fragment 4: The Speed That Erases Process

A colleague describes using an AI tool to generate a literature review summary. The text appeared flawless, confidently citing foundational sources. Only later did someone notice that recent critical work, published in smaller journals, was entirely absent. De Leon et al.'s (2025) analysis of tools like Scopus AI reveals a troubling efficiency. We can generate reviews, or other writing, with a few prompts, rather than through the labour of reading, synthesising, and dwelling with sources. These systems are black box models where a human researcher examining the results cannot know, or is obliged not to care enough to find out, how those results were obtained. GenAI delivers text without thought, synthesis without understanding. The danger is not only lurking inaccuracy but a façade of comprehensiveness, giving a sense of having surveyed a field smoothed over by elite algorithmic regurgitation. Thus the asymmetry between those who gain speed through GenAI tools, and those committed to writing as thinking. There may be costs to GenAI-accelerated knowledge work that impact more than a mere sense of hollowed-out scholarship. The researcher still writes, but we question whether the writing thinks or speaks into the future as an intertemporal collaboration (Inman, 2003).

The above fragments sought to depict shards from GenAI-shattered collaboration: tensions and tangles the Guardians help us name. Thus, we turn to the GotG characters themselves, each offering aspects of what needs to be guarded, and how. We begin with *Star-Lord*, a figure of fragmentation and longing, before introducing Gamora, Rocket, Nebula, Groot, Mantis and Drax.

Star-Lord (Peter Quill): Guardian lingering hope amidst chronic fragmentation and loss

Star-Lord helps us notice how play, nostalgia, and improvisation can become fragile modes of survival in environments marked by loss, acceleration, and chronic dislocation.

He carries his mother's mixtape like a reliquary, a sonic relic looping through the noise of galaxies that spin too fast and far from anything that feels like home. The music becomes memory, ritual, the fragile thread that binds a past he cannot return to with a future he does not understand. In Peter Quill, who names himself Star-Lord with more hope than conviction, we find a subject fragmented across identities, born of Earth, raised among outlaws, half-human and half-celestial, and fully at home nowhere. Not a hero in the traditional sense, not steady, certain or grounded by origin or purpose. Instead, he is reactive, impulsive, and often distracted. And yet, within his dislocation lies something deeply resonant with phenomenology's concern for the thrownness of existence. He is, in Heidegger's sense, thrown (*geworfen*) into a world he did not choose, improvising being from whatever fragments are at hand. His nostalgia is not mere sentimentality. It is a reaching towards coherence, a desire to touch again the world before it was technologised, pirated, and reframed as survival.

Quill's hybridity evokes what it means to live across ontologies. He stands, shifting between one foot in memory and the other in myth. Neither offers certainty. The celestial inheritance offers him power, but also emptiness. The human inheritance offers him feeling, but also loss. And so he lingers in between, disoriented but not disinterested, distracted yet not unfeeling, suspended in a kind of cosmic adolescence. In him, we see the risk of disconnection, but also the ache for reconnection. He reminds us that knowledge without rootedness becomes drift, and identity without relation becomes noise. Phenomenologically, he embodies the struggle for situated knowing, the need to reinhabit experience, and the haunting sense that we may be losing access to the world as lived. And yet, despite it all, he keeps returning to the music, the team, to the improbable hope that even a fragmented self might still belong and *matter*, might still be capable of guarding something not yet lost.

Gamora: Guarding the Possibility of Ethics amid Violence

Gamora brings ethical vigilance into view by revealing how responsibility can emerge from within violence itself, prior to principle, calculation, or moral certainty.

Gamora moves with the discipline of one who has trained her body to obey death. Yet her every act betrays a deeper pull, not toward power, but toward care. Raised within the totalising violence of Thanos's regime, she was sculpted to be both weapon and daughter, an obedient inheritor of a system that annihilates otherness. But in her resistance, however flawed, we glimpse something deeper, a moral instinct that precedes ideology, a trembling responsibility that cannot be reduced to role or function.

Levinas (1998, p. 117) writes that, "the responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question 'Where?' no longer holds". Gamora enacts this not so much in speech as protection. She defends even when misunderstood, refusing to surrender her ethical bearings, even as her loyalties tear her apart. Her affective gestures are bruised, partial, concealed beneath armour, but they persist. In this, she becomes the figure of what must still be guarded, the possibility of care inside systems that no longer ask us to be ethical. She defends, even when misunderstood. She does not abandon her ethical bearings, even when loyalty threatens to undo her.

Rocket and Nebula: Guarding the Possibility of Healing Without Erasure

Rocket and Nebula foreground how damage sustained through technological and disciplinary intervention cannot be resolved through optimisation or repair alone, but calls for relational forms of healing that resist erasure.

Their bodies are maps of intrusive, unwonted intervention. Each carries the trace of a past written not only in metal and circuitry, but in voluble absence, memory, and wounds. Rocket, engineered into militant sentience and armoured by design, deflects pain through ingenuity. Nebula, rebuilt after each defeat and hardened by punishment, contains her pain. Both were forged inside systems that reshaped them in the name of survival and function. Both remind us that survival is not the same as healing. Stiegler (2013) writes of the *pharmakon* as that which both gives and steals life, a supplement that is never neutral. Its power lies not only in what it offers, but in how it interrupts. Rocket's brilliance protects him, but at the cost of contact. Nebula's strength sustains her, but at the cost of trust. They were fashioned as tools, but more remains. Their presence is not sterile but aches with withheld feeling. They endure as relational beings, even if the relation is awkward, interrupted, or barely verbalised. Together, they guard something easily lost in systems that prioritise performance over presence. They remind us that healing is not a technical process. It is relational, and the long labour of learning to be with others again, after pain has taught us to withdraw. In Rocket and Nebula, we see that to survive requires a form of presence that no upgrade, no algorithm, no reassembly can provide. What they guard is the possibility that wholeness may still arrive, not through erasure, but through the holding of what cannot be undone.

Groot and Mantis: Guarding the Quiet Forms of Knowing

Groot and Mantis bring into view forms of knowing that arise through embodiment, attunement, and presence, reminding us that understanding is not always cognitive, articulable, or fast.

There are knowings that do not arrive through definition, argument or instruction. Instead, they move through presence, gesture, pause. They rest in the felt but not always named. Groot and Mantis carry this quieter kind of knowledge, not seeking centre stage or asking to be understood. And yet, through them, we are offered a glimpse of what Merleau-Ponty called "the body as our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 146). They dwell at that threshold, where meaning is not thought into being, but lived and sensed. Groot, with his one sentence spoken in infinite inflections, becomes the figure of silent relation. His knowing is not cognitive, but somatic, tonal, gestural. He reminds us that language is not only what is said, but also what is carried in the timbre, cadence, pitch, intensity, and breathing. His sacrifice, understated and unclaimed, speaks to a kind of care that does not ask for recognition. To understand Groot is not to translate his words, but to enter the field of relation he creates by simply staying. Mantis lives even closer to vulnerability. Her knowing emerges not through logic but through touch. Her hands do not grasp to control but to attune. She becomes porous to others' feelings, not to consume them, but to honour them. In her, knowledge is not about clarity, but resonance. She reminds us that emotional attunement is not an afterthought to reason, but its foundation.

Together, they guard the possibility that knowledge might still be born through presence, that not all truths can be indexed for acceleration. In an age of abstraction and automation, their forms of knowing slow us down. They become companions to those who work with care, not efficiency, and who sense that the most important things we know are ineffable. Their guardianship is unheroic: subtle, lived, relational. They remind us that to protect the conditions of thinking is not only to think hard, but to feel deeply. To notice and linger.

If Groot and Mantis reveal that thought can move through gesture, attunement, and quiet embodiment, then they help us feel what it means to guard knowledge without needing to explain it. This is, after all, what the Guardians of the Galaxy are: unlikely, awkward, contradictory protectors of something fragile but essential. They quarrel. They grieve. They fall apart. And yet, somehow, they keep showing up for the fight, to keep hope and meaning alive. Phenomenology, too, is this kind of guardianship: not a method that smooths or solves, but a commitment to ponder with what resists capture. A way of thinking that lingers when all else has moved on. A based, fell refusal to outsource understanding to speed or to systems.

Drax: Guarding the Fragility of Interpretation

Drax foregrounds how meaning can fracture when interpretation is stripped of context, irony, or relational attunement, exposing the vulnerability of understanding itself. Drax does not understand metaphor. He hears only what is said, not what is meant. “Nothing goes over my head...” he declares. “...My reflexes are too fast.” He is sincere in this, and in that sincerity lies both comedy and a quiet tragedy. For Drax lives in a world that has lost the in-between, a world where nuance is too often mistrusted, and ambiguity mistaken for error. His literalism, while exaggerated for effect, mirrors a broader cultural drift toward the instrumental, the unequivocal, the algorithmically optimised. To think phenomenologically is to resist this drift. It is to remain with the thickness of meaning, to hold open the textures of the world without rushing to conclusion. In Drax, we encounter a figure who cannot abide uncertainty, not because he is unfeeling, but because he has been shaped by grief so profound that only clarity feels safe. His vengeance is not just for the family he lost, but for the world that no longer makes sense. Violence rendered his life incomprehensible, and so he grasps for what is definite, even if it cannot fully contain the truth.

Phenomenology reminds us that experience unfolds in gesture, tone, and hesitation. To understand is not merely to decode, but to dwell. Drax reacts and acts. And yet, in his loyalty and clumsy affection, in the blunt weight of his presence, he reveals what is at stake when interpretation collapses into execution. He guards nothing ornate. What he protects, paradoxically, is the fragile space where metaphor might still live. Where meaning might shimmer rather than settle. He reminds us that literalism is not always a failure of intellect. Sometimes it is a scar. Perhaps the refusal to play with meaning is the tell of having once been severed from it.

Closing: To guard the conditions of thought

What the Guardians offer is not perfection, but persistence. Not mastery, but memory. Not brilliance without blemish, but the willingness to reside, fractured and unfinished, beside what matters. Perhaps this is what phenomenology, as we see it, closely shares with the GotG. It is not a method that fixes, but a posture that lingers. It holds space where language falters. It stays with trouble, protecting the difficult, tender, and the strange. In each figure we have traced, from the literalism of Drax to the pathic resonance of Groot, we encounter not types or models, but tensions. GotG reminds us that care can wear many faces, that interpretation can be lost and found again, relation can be sustained even while broken, and that knowledge, when it comes, does not always arrive through reason, but embodied presence. Phenomenology, we say, is not only tradition, but a kind of guardianship. A way of moving against the grain of compression and control. A way of thinking that allows the world to thicken again, to resist simplification, and remain vibrantly full of questions. It does not ask for allegiance but for attention, guarding the fidelity of organic experience and sustaining the courage to stay close to dim understandings.

To guard thinking, then, is not to own and package it, but to accompany and shelter it, to believe that something human remains worth protecting, even when it becomes inconvenient to systems of speed. As Johnson et al. (2024, p. 5) write, phenomenological work helps sustain “an optimistic belief in and pursuit of untapped subtleties and possibilities alive in every everyday phenomena” and this belief carries with it a responsibility. A quiet demand to stay with what the world too easily abandons. To hold open a space where meaning is not reduced, not resolved, but allowed to breathe. If phenomenologists are guardians, it is not because they oppose the future. It is because they remain with what the future might forget.

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