



Richir, Merleau Ponty, and the possibility of a transcendental aesthetics

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Abstract: This article exposes Marc Richir's grounding of a transcendental aesthetics and his understanding of art, which considers the idea, already investigated by Husserl, that imagination and phantasy are fundamental pre-intentional acts that delineate the horizons of the relationship of human and world, both affectively and epistemologically. It has been studied how Richir's phenomenological perspective was influenced on the one hand by Edmund Husserl's analysis of specific acts of consciousness, and, on the other hand, by Kant's transcendental schematism. However, in my article I show how Richir's perspective on a transcendental aesthetics is particularly fertile because it incorporates, not only Kant's schematism and Husserl's *Aktanalyse*, but also Merleau-Ponty's idea of a "flesh of the world" and his contribution to the understanding of the affective, bodily nature of knowledge, which, as it will be exposed, offers a new account of the transcendental. This sheds a light not only on specific epistemological matters, but also on the fact of art itself.

Palabras clave: estética trascendental, Husserl, arte, Merleau-Ponty, Richir, esquematismo, afectividad, cuerpo, imaginación.

[es] Richir, Merleau Ponty, y la posibilidad de una estética trascendental

Abstract: Este artículo presenta los fundamentos de la estética trascendental de Marc Richir y su comprensión del arte, que considera la idea, ya investigada por Husserl, de que la imaginación y la fantasía son actos pre-intencionales fundamentales que delimitan los horizontes de la relación entre el ser humano y el mundo, tanto afectivamente como epistemológicamente. Se ha estudiado cómo la perspectiva fenomenológica de Richir fue influenciada, por un lado, por el análisis de actos específicos de la conciencia de Edmund Husserl, y, por otro lado, por el esquematismo trascendental de Kant. Sin embargo, en mi artículo muestro cómo la perspectiva de Richir sobre una estética trascendental es particularmente fecunda porque incorpora, no solo el esquematismo kantiano y el *Aktanalyse* de Husserl, sino también la idea de Merleau-Ponty de una "carne del mundo" y su contribución a la comprensión de la naturaleza afectiva y corporal del conocimiento, que, como se expondrá, ofrece una nueva interpretación de lo trascendental. Esto arroja luz no solo sobre cuestiones epistemológicas específicas, sino también sobre el fenómeno mismo del arte.

Keywords: transcendental aesthetics, Husserl, art, Merleau-Ponty, Richir, schematism, affectivity, body, imagination.

Summary: 1. Introduction; 2. Merleau-Ponty, Richir and the *wild Wesen*; 3. Merleau Ponty's transcendental claim: body as schema; 4. Richir and the transcendental aesthetics; 5. Bibliographical references.

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1. Introduction

This article is intended to be an exposition of Marc Richir's grounding of a transcendental aesthetics and his understanding of art, which is based on the hypothesis that imagination and phantasy are fundamental pre-intentional acts that delineate the horizons of the relationship of human and world, hence being the source of knowledge. From the studies of authors such as Carlson (2016, 2017), and Varela (2017), we know that Richir's phenomenological perspective was influenced on the one hand by Edmund Husserl's analysis of specific acts of consciousness, and, on the other hand, by Kant's transcendental schematism. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the lack of such research in English, my argument suggests that Richir's perspective on a transcendental aesthetics is particularly fertile because it incorporates, together with Kant's schematism and Husserl's *Aktanalyse*, Merleau-Ponty's idea of a "flesh of the world" and his contribution to the understanding of the affective, bodily nature of knowledge, which, speaking of an original reciprocity between body and world, offers – as Matherne (2019) explains – a new account of the transcendental.

First, it has to be stressed how Richir's transcendental aesthetics operates on a phenomenological basis. Husserl's phenomenology, developed at the beginning of the 20th century, aimed essentially at describing the appearance of things as structures of experience, claiming that our knowledge of the world – thanks to the complex constitution of transcendental consciousness – is far richer than that which sensory perception, understood in the traditional sense of *Abbildung*, can deliver to us. Accordingly, with regard to aesthetics, phenomenology appeared from its very beginning as a refutation of the common philosophy of representation, which affirms that a phenomenon (the appearance of a thing) is a simple reproduction, or a mental elaboration, of externally perceived objects. In this case, any image or object of art, as Plato was already claiming in his *Republic*, would be wrongly understood as a mere copy of a pre-given reality, something with a diminished ontological status. Husserl opened up a new way for these investigations, distinguishing between acts of perception, imagination, and signifying² acts, pointing out that imagination has a distinct status separate from perception: it is not a kind of weakened perception, but has its own character, fundamental for the eidetic constitution of the world. In this regard, the philosopher spoke about the concept of "image consciousness", indicating a unique kind of experience that involves both perception and imagining.

Furthermore, as mentioned, for the Belgian philosopher, understanding imagination and aesthetic experience meant assuming the *transcendental schematism* of Kantianism – where imagination comes to play a fundamental, strategic role in knowledge. In fact, first of all – as Carlson correctly formulated – in Kant's thought, imagination is situated critically at the bifurcation between proper knowledge and the

² "Signifying acts" are acts that "emptily" intend objects by denoting and connoting them without bringing them to sensory, bodily presence. As Husserl began to outline in his 1901 *Logical Investigations*, an intuitive intention is directed at an object that "can either be actually present through accompanying intuitions, or at least appears in representation, e.g. in a mental image". (Hua XIX, 44/Vol. 1, 192). The intuited object appears directly in perception or it appears in the "mind's eye" via imagination. A signitive act, that is, a non-intuitive intention, in contrast, discloses an object that does not appear in person via perception and is not represented imaginatively. Husserl writes that "[a] signitive intention merely points at its object, an intuitive intention gives it 'presence' ... A signitive presentation does not present analogically, it is 'in reality' no presentation, in it nothing of the object comes to life". (Hua XIX, 670/Vol. 2, p. 233).

“transcendental illusion”³. On the one hand, it can always be a source of illusion, as long as it sells as a reality what it is merely (in Kantian terms) *thinking*. On the other hand, imagination provides access to a real, vivid experience, in which knowledge is something realized by a concrete, particular subjectivity – and, in this sense, something necessarily connected with its schematizing work and its articulation with the concepts of reason⁴. Even though Kant’s influence will not be investigated here, it is important to stress Richir’s reception of *Critique of Judgment* and how Kant’s own terminology builds a part of Richir’s conceptual apparatus, as it can be affirmed that Kant anticipates the idea of a transcendental aesthetics – something that will be related to Merleau-Ponty’s analysis too. To this regard, in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant affirms that: “The power of imagination (*facultas imaginandi*), as a faculty of intuition without the presence of the object, is either productive, that is, a faculty of the original presentation [*ursprüngliche Darstellung*], of the object (*exhibitio originaria*) which thus precedes experience; or reproductive, a faculty of derivative presentation [*abgeleitete Darstellung*] of the object (*exhibitio derivativa*), which brings back to the mind an intuition that it had previously”⁵. This means that imagination, as a faculty of presentation, is able to give to us more than is perceptually present and delivered through the senses, and in this regard represents a capacity of preceding and sketching out experience.

Hence, taking inspiration from the rich field opened by Husserl’s phenomenology and its work of unfolding the sense of all the notions and acts implied in the human being’s relation to the world, as well as from Kant’s transcendentalism, Richir’s work aimed at clearing the horizons from which knowledge is arising; horizons that, in a broad sense, coincide with the ones of the aesthetic experience: literally, investigating the horizons at the origin of knowledge (its conditions of possibility), and identifying them with the horizons of the aesthetic experience, would mean nothing other than speaking about a transcendental aesthetics.

As stated above, this article aims to show how Richir’s endeavor to elaborate a possible synthesis between Kant and Husserl in order to find a new transcendental aesthetics takes advantage of Merleau-Ponty’s “radical reflection” and his idea of “flesh in the world”. In order to understand properly the role of the imagination and the idea of a transcendental aesthetic, therefore, it is necessary first of all to deepen what Richir, referring to Merleau-Ponty, calls the “phenomenological architectonics”: according to the philosopher, in its regressive process phenomenology has to show the constitutive origin of the *eidos* within the framework of a transcendental constitution of the horizon; that is to say: if, as mentioned, phenomenology accomplishes the task of overcoming the traditional philosophy of representation, where essences are given in an ideal disincarnated world and knowledge is a sort of reproduction of these essences (so that art remains a copy of a pre-given world), then it has to find

³ “There exists, then, a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason – not one in which a bungler might entangle himself through lack of knowledge, or one which some sophist has artificially invented to confuse thinking people, but one inseparable from human reason, and which, even after its deceptiveness [Blendwerk] has been exposed, will not cease to play tricks with reason and continually entrap it into momentary aberrations ever and again calling for correction.” (Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A298/B355).

⁴ Carlson, S., “Imaginaciones fenomenológicas (esquematismo, consciencia de imagen, phantasia): aproximaciones entrelazadas”. *Eikasia*, N. 712016, p. 3.

⁵ Kant, I., *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. Robert B. Loudon, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 60.

the original ground where the same knowledge is arising, that cannot be given but in an original union between body and world – a union that precedes and establish any theoretical capacity of the subject. In his article *Merleau-Ponty and the question of phenomenological Architectonics* Richir, after considering Heidegger's attempt of showing how *Dasein*'s possibilities are never possibilities of essences but of existence, formulates the present question as following: "Why would there not be a facticity of the *Wesen* in the same sense as facticity of existence? Why would the Husserlian 'I can' of flesh, incarnated in a *Leib*, a body of flesh, and not a pure intellectual possibility, why would it not be an ontological 'I can' of existing, and simultaneously of existing the world?"⁶.

According to Richir, Merleau Ponty's contribution would have been precisely that of discovering and showing that looking for the essence of the world, as the phenomenologist says in the *Foreword* to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, does not mean looking for what it is in idea, once we have reduced it to discursive theme, but it means rather looking for what it is in fact for us *before* any thematization.

2. Merleau-Ponty, Richir and the *wild Wesen*

As stated above, what I identify as the contribution of Merleau-Ponty to the grounding of a transcendental aesthetics, and what in fact Richir retains from his thought, is the idea of the affective/imaginative/bodily nature of knowledge. This idea is based on the assumption that, in spite of being a pure spectator of the phenomenon of the world, the human being is originally and radically *in* the world, and this by virtue of what Merleau-Ponty calls "perceptive faith", a rehabilitation of the Husserlian notion of *Urdoxa* (which designates a primordial, unshakable certainty in the fundamental features of the own self and the world⁷). It is by means of this faith that, as Richir underlines, we are always already in the world, and "we accept it since we are ourselves set in the world without any possibility, other than imaginary of retreating from it"⁸. This idea of a radical being in the world implies, as mentioned, a rethinking of the phenomenological concept of essences, or idealities, that, as known, were found by Husserl thanks to the phenomenological process of *epochè*. The *epochè*, as a technic of abstraction, aimed at disclosing the operative consciousness of the transcendental subject and the essences correlated to it. Merleau-Ponty assumed a critical position towards this phenomenological procedure: opposing the "phenomenological positivism", whose eidetic method would base the possible on the real (the factual) – and situating himself thereby between Heidegger's ontic fact

⁶ Richir, M., "Merleau-Ponty and the Question of Phenomenological Architectonics", transl. by René Maxime Marinoni, in P. Burke and J. Van der Veken (eds.), *Merleau Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993, p. 43.

⁷ „Alle Erfahrung in diesem konkreten Sinne ruht zuunterst auf der schlichten, letzte, schlicht erfahrbare Substrate vorgebenden *Urdoxa*. Die in ihr vorgegebenen naturalen Körper sind letzte Substrate für alle weiteren Bestimmungen, sowohl die kognitiven wie auch die ,Weltbestimmungen und die praktischen Bestimmungen“. In this passage, Husserl refers to "urdoxa" as the original, pre-reflective layer of belief or acceptance upon which all concrete experience is grounded—an unthematized trust in the existence of the world and natural bodies, serving as the ultimate substrate for all further cognitive, practical, and worldly determinations. (Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil, Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik*, hrsg. Ludwig Landgrebe, Claassen & Goverts, 1954, p. 60).

⁸ Richir, M., "Merleau-Ponty and the Question of Phenomenological Architectonics", 1993, p. 44.

(the *Vorhandenheit*) and Husserl's eidetic ideality (equally *vorhanden* and arrived at by ideation) – promotes a new concept of *Wesen*: *Wesen* as an “active essence”, or living essence, given in a precise moment to a precise subject; what would invert the hierarchization between possible and real, as all experience is built upon an ultimate radical possibility; and what pretends to overcome an intellectualistic conception of knowledge.

In this respect, without renouncing the idea of essence, a primary phenomenological notion, Merleau-Ponty develops an attempt to think it beyond the typical antithesis existence/essence or fact/essence. He affirms in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

The possibilities by essence can indeed envelop and dominate the facts; they themselves derive from another, and more fundamental, possibility: that which works over my experience, opens it to the world and to Being, and which, to be sure, does not find them before itself as facts but animates and organizes their facticity⁹.

This indicates indeed that a fundamental possibility, more primary than “the logico-eidetic possibility of ideations and the variations based on facts” exists, such that eidetic possibilities “appear themselves like factual possibilities of existing that are organized by the possibility which opens my experience to the world and to Being.” This is the idea of a *Wild Being*, “that pre-spiritual milieu without which nothing is thinkable”¹⁰. For Merleau-Ponty, essences “overtly refer to our acts of ideation which have lifted them from a brute being, wherein we must find again in their wild state what answers to our essences and our significations”¹¹. In this sense, the essences are not positive, but rather “articulations or hinges of Being”. As a matter of fact, even in the phenomenological process of *epochè* the revealed essences show themselves as “removed” or abstracted from a brute and wild being that preceded them and is “non-coincident with them”. That's why according to Richir, if it is possible at all to speak about a transcendental eidetic (of which, as the Belgian philosopher underlines, Eugen Fink spoke extensively in his *VI Cartesian Meditation*), then man should speak about a “transcendental eidetic of the wild *Wesen*”. That is to say, assuming that *life* is an original structure of being – which brings Merleau-Ponty to the formulation of an ontology based on the ideas of process, event, and temporality – essences will be understood, using Richir's term, as *incarnate existentials*. They will be *Wesens of flesh*, of the body-of-flesh and of the world¹². All essences are given in fact *thanks* and *in* the lived experience of a living body open to the world.

To explain further the idea of a wild *wesen* and the primordial reciprocity of *Leib* and world, Richir takes up Merleau-Ponty's notion of *recouvrement* (coincidence) and elaborates on the idea of an *original distortion* of the phenomenon. This means generally that in order to avoid conceiving of the intuition of essences as a frontal and disincarnate vision¹³, it is necessary to understand the “pure difference” (the

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, M., *The visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1968, p. 110.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, M., *The visible and the Invisible* 1968, p. 204.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 110.

¹² Cf. Richir, M., “Merleau-Ponty and the Question of Phenomenological Architectonics”, 1993.

¹³ Carbone, M., “Variations of the sensible. The truth of Ideas and Idea of Philosophy in the later Merleau-Ponty”, in Flynn, B., Froman, W., Vallier, R. (eds.) *Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy: Transforming the*

non-coincidence with itself) of the phenomenalization of phenomena¹⁴, which at the same time speaks for this original complicity between body and world, more original than what we filter and interpret in the phases of presence of consciousness. This is Merleau-Ponty's idea of a "flesh of the world", which according to Richir would remove the barrier between phenomenology and metaphysics¹⁵: the idea of essence is here not simply the object of a disembodied eidetic intuition to which pure individuals, "indivisible glaciers of being", would be opposed. Rather, the "flesh" (*chair*) designates a pregiven ontological texture that supports both perception and world, prior to the subject-object division. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "The flesh of the world is (...) a pregnancy of possibles (...) absolutely not an object (...) it is by the flesh of the world that in the last analysis one can understand the lived body (...) The flesh of the world is of the Being-seen, and it is by it that we can understand the *percipere*"¹⁶.

According to this, for Richir, both essence and individual appear as having been intrinsically tied together "as brute essence and brute existence, which are the nodes and the antinodes of the same ontological vibration"¹⁷. In this sense, as the philosopher specifies, the field of ideality itself belongs to the phenomenological field: "It is neither another world nor a 'hinter-world', but a dimension (which has itself been put in a phenomenal sense into a lower gear) of the phenomenon"¹⁸. In this regard, Richir quotes a passage of Merleau-Ponty's famous work *The Visible and the Invisible* that considers the body self-relation as making possible the "overlying-at-a-distance" of consciousness to things:

When I find the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations of my acts. But this does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body touched and my body touching there is an overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that things pass into us as well as we into the things¹⁹.

This would mean, as Costello underlines, that a distance or deflection is the opening of the body to itself, of the body onto the thing, which speaks for a proximity of the

Tradition, New York: State University of New York Press 2009, p. 243.

¹⁴ "If Richir borrows from Kant the concept of schematism, even if it is rather a matter of schematic improvisation ("schematism "does not know what it schematizes," and does not decide "what it schematizes within itself") phenomenologically, nothing prefigures what is phenomenalized, every determination seems related to what it determines without intrinsically belonging to it. "Before" schematizing anything, phenomenological schematism phenomenalizes itself as schematism, that is, as the movement of retrieving and, concomitantly, of always losing itself. It appears thus as an original disequilibrium, displaced from itself, belated and in advance in relation to itself, and is nothing else than this original displacement of a "broken movement" that "concretizes itself" by its internal gaping. As pure flowing, schematism is neither duration nor instant; it only phenomenalizes itself by differing from itself; it is a pure difference that is a difference due only to its differing always-already from itself". Forestier, F., "The phenomenon and the transcendental: Jean-Luc Marion, Marc Richir, and the issue of phenomenalization", *Continental Philosophy Review*, 45 (2012), p. 386.

¹⁵ Richir, M., *Phénoménologie en esquisses*, Grenoble, J. Millon 2000, p. 531.

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M., *The visible and the invisible*, 1968, p. 250.

¹⁷ Richir, M., "The Meaning of Phenomenology in the Visible and the Invisible", Massachusetts: *Thesis Eleven*, Number 36, pp. 60-81, 1993, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, M., *The visible and the invisible* 1968, p. 123

body to the thing, that is never a full coincidence, but rather a unity, without which a transcendental phenomenology could not work at all²⁰. As mentioned, Merleau-Ponty himself was not averse to calling his phenomenology a “transcendental philosophy”, being his transcendental philosophy, as Matherne argues, the proper subject matter of his phenomenological method, the method of “radical reflection”²¹, which refers to the *a priori* as the still unreflective, bodily experience of the world.

Thus, this kind of cohesion constitutes the basis of a transcendental aesthetics, where body and world are taken in the same original facticity, no longer being two separated entities: so, the images are no longer understood as mere representations of things, but much more as constitutive processes of our intercourse with the world.

Merleau-Ponty insists on this in his *Eye and Mind*:

The word ‘image’ is in bad repute because we have thoughtlessly believed that a design was a tracing, a copy, a second thing, and that the mental image was such a design, belonging among our private bric-a-brac. But if in fact it is nothing of the kind, then neither the design nor the painting belongs to the in-itself any more than the image does. They are the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside, which the duplicity of feeling [*le sentir*] makes possible and without which we would never understand the quasi presence and imminent visibility which make up the whole problem of the imaginary²².

So, the problem of the imaginary concerns the visibility of which both body and world are made of: if I see to the extent that I can project my body into the world it is nonetheless true that “my body can see only to the extent that it is itself part of the visible.” As Merleau-Ponty says in the *Eye and the Mind*, it is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings, which presupposes that the artist’s body is immersed in and made of the same stuff as the world: to touch, one must be tangible, and to see, visible. Merleau-Ponty describes this as an “intertwining” or “overlapping”, in which the artist’s situated embodiment is the other side of its opening to the world. There is yet no sharp division between the sensing and the sensed, between body and things as one common “flesh”, and painting arises as the expression of this relation: it is a “visible to the second power, a carnal essence or icon” of embodied vision²³. Having said that, it is necessary to better understand how for Merleau-Ponty the body assumes the function of a “schema”, that is something that, constituting one’s perspective on the world, articulates the whole space of possibilities of experience.

3. Merleau Ponty’s transcendental claim: body as schema

As Merleau-Ponty insists on in the *Phenomenology of perception*, the horizons of all possible perceptual experience are functions of the body in which it is realized.

²⁰ Costello, P., “Richir and the Phenomenology of Flesh” *Studia Phaenomenologica* (vol. XII, 2012).

²¹ Cf. Matherne, S., “Toward a New Transcendental Aesthetic: Merleau-Ponty’s Appraisal of Kant’s Philosophical Method”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 2019, p. 379.

²² Merleau-Ponty, M., “Eye and Mind”, Translated by Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception, And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, James M. Edie (ed.), Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 164.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, M., “Eye and Mind”, 1964, p. 164.

The simple fact of the asymmetry existing between bodily perspective and objective observation points to the way in which the structure of perception is not just caused or conditioned but *constituted* by the structure of the body²⁴. As Husserl already observed, perception is not just the presence of objects to a subject, but it is always given in a horizontal structure, specifically the visual field that relates to the body – that’s why seeing a photograph is something very different than seeing the object itself. In this regard, as Carman underlines, all perception has a figure/ground contrast, which is not merely a physiological fact, corresponding to the physiological structure of the eye, but part of an *a priori* structure of perception, and this in the sense that it provides a stable framework within which we are able to recognize the element of our experience. To this respect, the phenomenal field is not just a bundle of sensory facts, but instead it constitutes a “transcendental field”²⁵, a space of abiding perceptual possibilities²⁶; and – what is of great importance for the subject matter of this article – Merleau-Ponty affirms that this space of possibilities is articulated by what he calls the *body schema* (*schéma corporel*), a concept he develops notably in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he defines it as “a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal ‘place’ in the world. As he explains, the body does not occupy space as an object among others, but opens a *spatiality of situation*, where it appears “as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task”, and thus articulates perceptual experience through the *body schema* (*schéma corporel*)²⁷.

It is precisely the notion of schema, whose philosophical relevance can be traced back to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, that accounts for the new transcendentalism we are describing here. So, what is the body schema? Kant, with his idea of schematism, intended to resolve the problem of applying the categories of the intellect to the empirical intuitions: if the categories, *qua* pure concepts and mediate universal representations, are heterogeneous with respect to intuitions, *qua* immediate empirical representations, and if we cannot literally see (or feel or hear) such things as number, possibility, causality, or substance, and yet we perceive things as exhibiting those concepts, then a “third thing” (*ein Drittes*) must be found, homogeneous with both the concept and the intuition. This third thing appears to be the transcendental schemata:

There must be some third thing (*ein Drittes*), which must stand in homogeneity (*Gleichartigkeit*) with the category on the one hand and the appearance on the other, and makes possible the application of the former to the latter. This mediating representation must be intellectual on the one hand and sensible on the other. Such a representation is the transcendental schema²⁸.

The schema of a concept, therefore, is a procedure by which the imagination provides the concept with an image. Consequently, the schema is to be distinguished

²⁴ Carman, T., *Merleau Ponty*, New York: Routledge 2008, p. 103.

²⁵ Merleau Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. by Colin Smith, New York: Routledge Classics 2002, p. 71.

²⁶ Carman, T., *Merleau Ponty*, 2008, p. 105.

²⁷ “Brought down to a precise sense, this term means that my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of ‘spatial sensations’, a *spatiality of position*, but a *spatiality of situation*.” Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 114.

²⁸ Kant, I., A138/B177

from an image, for whereas images are always concrete particulars, schemata must anticipate in advance an indefinitely wide range of possible applications of the concept. It is therefore the imagination, and not the intellect, which shapes the space of possibilities in which we can apprehend objects as falling under concepts²⁹. The body schema represents thus the structure which sketches out in advance our awareness of things, the ability – as Carman affirms – to anticipate and incorporate the world prior to applying concepts of objects. This is a “dynamic” capacity, in as much as my body appears to me as a posture with a view to a certain actual or possible task. “... If I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are accentuated and the whole of my body trails behind them like the tail of a comet”³⁰. It has to be stressed that, by doing this, Merleau-Ponty is not just offering – as it could be interpreted from some passages and as Carman himself seems to argue – a theory of perception, but is developing a pre-cognitive account of understanding that serves as an alternative to the intellectualist view, and in which the imagination assumes the role of conditioning the possibility of experience³¹. In this sense, the traditional idea of understanding has to be rethought in a way that acknowledges that it has its basis not in cognition or judgment, but rather in our bodily engagement with the world. According to this, Merleau-Ponty indicates that the bodily understanding accounts for both the “real” and the “virtual” engagement with the world, as “... the normal subject’s body is not merely ready to be mobilized by real situations that draw it toward themselves, it can also turn away from the world... and be situated in the virtual... the normal person reckons with the possible”³².

That this transcendental function of the body is something more complex than the role played by the simple structure of human perception – and that it can be claimed that it works properly as Kantian schematism (but, we can say, in an “incarnate” way) – is testified by what Merleau-Ponty calls the function of projection³³, a fundamental function lying beneath intelligence and perception, namely the general power of placing oneself in a situation,

[the] the same ability to mark out boundaries and directions in the given world, to establish lines of force, to keep perspectives in view, in a world, to organize the given world in accordance with the projects of the present moment, to build into the geographical setting a behavioural one, a system of meanings outwardly expressive of the subject’s internal activity³⁴.

Again, it is the body, the origin of all expressive spaces, projecting significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes³⁵. Thus, the expression, at the origin of which is the body, or, in other words, these “bodily projections”, is what literally makes significations *exist*, and be perceptually present to us.

²⁹ Carman, T., *Merleau Ponty* 2008, p. 106.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2002, p. 115.

³¹ Matherne, S., “Toward a New Transcendental Aesthetic: Merleau-Ponty’s Appraisal of Kant’s Philosophical Method” 2019, p. 386.

³² Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2002, p. 125.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 129

³⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2002.

Returning to the transcendental claim and its relation to imagination, the way in which Merleau-Ponty himself points out the continuity between his view and Kant's should be stressed, as Matherne shows. In the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty affirms:

Kant himself shows in the *Critique of Judgement* that there exists a unity of the imagination and the understanding (...) which is itself without any concept. Here the subject is no longer the universal thinker of a system of objects rigorously interrelated, the positing power who subjects the manifold to the law of the understanding, in so far as he is to be able to put together a world—he discovers and enjoys his own nature as spontaneously in harmony with the law of the understanding. But if the subject has a nature, then the hidden art of the imagination must condition the categorial activity. It is no longer merely the aesthetic judgement, but knowledge too which rests upon this art, an art which forms the basis of the unity of consciousness and of consciousness³⁶.

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty insists on how Kant, by demonstrating the union of imagination and understanding that “precedes” experience, shows how this union is indeed pre-conceptual. By doing this, as Matherne notes, he suggests that Kant is thereby recognizing that imagination underwrites not only reflective and aesthetic judgment, but also serves as the condition of possibility of both knowledge and the unity of consciousness – with the latter referring not just to the unity of all subjective intentional acts, but to that *fungierende Intentionalität* that concerns our pre-predicative relation to the world, through imagination, perception, affect, etc³⁷. Hence, if already in Kant we can find the idea that imagination involves our power to figure any intention whatever in the world, Merleau-Ponty adds the important condition that this just happens thanks to the function of the body schema, and its capacity of sketching out in advance all possibility of experience and all awareness of things.

4. Richir and the transcendental aesthetics

Returning to Richir, as said above, the Belgian philosopher proposes an architectonic regrounding of phenomenology, which is not based anymore, as in Husserl's, on the intentional experiences of consciousness – where the objectifying acts of perception define man's definitive relationship to things – but rather in the type of “pre-intentional knowledge” where the body schema and the imagination play the most fundamental role. It can be therefore affirmed that, starting from (and at the same time building on) the works of Husserl, Kant, and Merleau-Ponty, the aim of Richir's philosophy consists in exploring the imaginative and bodily basis of intentionality underlying all objectivization. Richir's phenomenology holds therefore a transcendental claim, not in the traditional sense of the transcendental ego, but rather in the transcendental sense of the “power of the phenomenalization” that imagination (and phantasy, to use

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2002, xix

³⁷ Matherne, S., “Toward a New Transcendental Aesthetic: Merleau-Ponty's Appraisal of Kant's Philosophical Method” 2019, p. 395.

another, wider concept of it³⁸) consists in³⁹. With this, Richir, as we'll now illustrate, purports on the one hand to offer a better account of human experience, and on the other hand to elucidate the problem of appearance, or, better said, of phenomena as appearance. The former point implies a rethinking of Kantian schematism that would consider the basic human experience of man, endowed with a live body and projecting himself in the world; the second one implies a radicalization of the husserlian concept of *epoché*, which would mean not just suspending the thesis about the existence of the natural world in order to regain its modalities of appearance to consciousness, but rather considering what Husserl himself called the "institution of sense" (*Sinnstiftung*) as a proper "sense-formation" (*Sinnbildung*), that is something of a fashioning – impersonal, "asubjective" – of sense⁴⁰. This would necessarily imply thinking appearance as having radical no-identity with itself, that is, as fundamentally indeterminate. With Richir's words:

Appearance only appears, classically, as generating interferences, as a factor of instability for precise measurement, precisely resulting unapparent in the order of being (if it is not in a determinate disorder...), it disorders and disturbs it in virtue of the multiplicity of origins of its appearing, and thanks to its strange powers of duplicity, ubiquity, or, better said, of multi-locality, which merges with its ungraspable character⁴¹.

Richir's insistence on appearances as something fundamentally plural, not-identical with themselves and indeterminate (and even "absent") – a no-identity that speaks for a new "impersonal" grounding of phenomenology – clearly owes a debt to Merleau-Ponty. As the French philosopher already saw – as shown in §1 – the world, and human experience itself, are characterized by what he calls the *reversibility of flesh*; there is a not-identity of appearance with itself, as there is a not-identity of oneself with himself; there is an original distance, a deflection, an opening of the body to itself and to the things. The reversibility of the flesh suggests that, as Merleau-Ponty affirms in his late essay on Husserlian phenomenology, *The Philosopher and his Shadows*, my body and the body of the other are like organs of one single intercorporeality. From here, all phenomenon is understood as a phenomenon of the "body of the flesh" (*phénomène de corps-de-chair*), hence being constituted by a sensibility which is not the sensibility of the mere sensation, but rather a "spiritual sensibility", in the sense given to it by Kant in his third Critique by speaking of imagination⁴². Richir clarifies his vision of phenomenology in the following way:

.... Our consideration of the phenomenon as nothing but phenomenon thus amounts to radicalizing the Husserlian phenomenological reduction, and to giving it a new meaning: it is a matter of considering (by bracketing or putting out of play) the phenomenon outside

³⁸ The phenomenological difference between imagination and phantasy is not overlooked by Richir (who, to this regard, picks up the accurate Husserlian analysis of Hua XXIII - *Phantastie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung*), but it can't be deepened here, because it supposes to investigate with more precision Richir's receptions of Husserl's concept of image-consciousness.

³⁹ Richir, M., 1991, p. 55.

⁴⁰ Schnell, A., "Beyond Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty: the phenomenology of Marc Richir", in *Symposium*, vol. 20 no. 1 Spring: Varieties of Continental Philosophy and Religion 2016, p. 220.

⁴¹ Richir, M., « La vérité de l'apparence », en *La part de l'oeil*, n° 7: Art et Phénoménologie 1991, pp. 229-30.

⁴² Carlson, S., "Imaginaciones fenomenológicas (esquematismo, consciencia de imagen, phantasia): aproximaciones entrelazadas". *Eikasia*, N. 712016b, p. 157.

of all positivity and all determinacy that, for us, can only come from elsewhere and otherwise, of which it nonetheless constitutes... the transcendental matrix⁴³.

As we can read, the object of this “phenomenology as phenomenology” is not this or that phenomenon, but what makes it so that the phenomenon occurs – what Richir calls “phenomenalization”. This implies that in any case the phenomenon in its phenomenalization starts from or relies on a pre-given concept, and that’s why precisely imagination (schematism) plays a decisive role. Therefore, as Schnell affirms, using Kant’s terms in the *Critique of Judgement*, it is not “determinate”, but rather “reflective”:

This aesthetic reflection without a pre-given concept, as Kant has rigorously demonstrated, requires a free and productive schematism where the imagination in its freedom, as the power of constituting and gathering intuitions, finds itself subsumed by the understanding in its legality (as the power of unifying what is understood in the phenomenon): thus, there is in this ‘schematism without a (determinate) concept’ an intimate union between a diversity already tending towards unity and a unity already open to receiving this diversity. So, we recognize in it what we call the transcendental schematism of phenomenalization, where thought (understanding) and sensibility (imagination) are indiscernible, where imagination thinks and thinking imagines, and where, consequently, thinking is appropriated into the phenomenality of the phenomenon so constituted⁴⁴.

The originality of Richir consists thus precisely in the introduction of a phenomenological schematism which is not conceivable without the body and its being one flesh with the world, inverting thereby the constitutive relationship between the opening to the world and its understanding, or reflexive appropriation by the subject: “It is the (...) *ek-stasis of the phenomenon of phenomenon*, coextensive to the originary distortion of phenomenon, to the inscription that is always already carried out in the transcendental schematisms of the phenomenalization, that constitutes the conditions of possibility and the transcendental matrix of the worldly *ek-stasis* (in the Heideggerian sense) rather than the opposite”⁴⁵. This would allow, as Carlson observes, a coping with a phenomenon as a *concrete* one, far away from being an appearance of what is reflected in and by a *cogito*, a phenomenon as the appearance (*parution*) of a “place in the world”:

Insofar as strictly co-extensive of a phase of presence that, for its part, is necessarily incarnated in a sort of constitutive excavation (*trouée*), in virtue of its horizons, incarnated in a sort of concrete world, one isn’t dealing, strictly speaking, with only this concrete and incarnated world, correlative of a scheme-organ: it can be addressing such vision, such sensation (...) such thought, such dream, such phantasma, such artwork (a canvas, a musical work, a poem, a book), such ‘global situation’ in the world, and of the world where the whole lived-body is involved⁴⁶.

⁴³ Richir, M., *Phénomènes, temps et êtres*, Grenoble, Jérôme Million 1987, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Ivi, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 31.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 17.

In fact, vision, sensation, thought, dream, this excavation of the world never corresponds to the sum or to the delimitation of what one actually sees, feels, thinks, dreams. The actual, as actually present, is never but “the shadow that the concept projects on the phase of presence, which is in turn coextensive of the world phenomenon and of the phenomenon *in* the world, as incarnated one”⁴⁷. What is a phenomenon also? According to Richir, painters have always been conscious of it. Constable, for example, knew it well when he said that it is not about a house, but it is about a summer morning in which there is a house. A phenomenon, in this sense, is nothing but a *phase of the world*.

With this, as seen, Richir is explicitly moving a critique to the traditional philosophy of representation, but also to the idea that the image, *imago* is something that refers to the “fixed” domain of the visual and aims to cover the entire field of imagination (or even of human experience in general). With his philosophy, Richir is looking for a deeper dimension, a dimension “beyond the image” – something that would be witnessed for example by the fact that someone unable to see can demonstrate the same capacity for imagining and phantasizing as anyone else⁴⁸. In fact, imagination, which at its foundation is essentially “unfigurable”, belongs to the order of *affectivity*—that ground of life not yet marked by what we understand by “subject”, “consciousness” etc., in the classical senses of these words. Accordingly, as Richir affirms, it is possible to admit a “human glance”, proper to the perceptive imagination, where—“in an exchange of glances”—each one perceives in the other this “original unfigurable”, beyond the bodily limits, where a reciprocal “dwelling” is possible (even if not a “coincidence”, to use Merleau-Ponty’s words). In fact, a glance that crosses another glance does not properly see “anything”, but rather sees in it “something unfigurable, like his life, or the modulations, in the form of affections, of his affectivity”. If a glance were properly speaking a vision, one would see in the other eye just one’s own pupil, as Hegel already stated in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.

This is also the task of painting: it tries, “perceiving in phantasy”, to grasp something transcendent. In fact, it is not that the painter tries to reproduce faithfully and according to his own talent something that he sees in the real world; rather he tries, so to say, to both unravel and enable by the means at his disposal (his abilities and the rules and materials of painting in a given historical moment) access to this unfigurable present in the figurable—and this, according to the gestures of his *Leibkörper* and his affections. Artists *create out of their Leiblichkeit*, but this *Leiblichkeit* itself cannot be represented voluntarily and directly: it remains in its undefined vagueness and may only be felt during its unintentional activity.

In this sense, artistic creation has its *telos* neither in convincing illusions (recognizable and confirming fictions) nor in rhetorical effects, but in opening our minds to the unconceivable: its *telos* lies in activating non-intentional phantasy and as-yet unshaped affect⁴⁹.

This means, according to Richir, that artistic creation consists in looking for the *true self* through an image that has to “remove” or “suspend” itself, in order to give

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ The 2017 movie *Radiance* by the director Kawase shows that well in the scenes where the “visual descriptor” of movies Masako works for blind people.

⁴⁹ Trinks, “Marc Richir”, in Hans Reiner Sepp and Lester Embree (eds.) *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics*, Dordrecht: Springer 2010, p. 288.

access to the perceptive imagination and its operativity: the true self present in the image will be the same thing that the spectator (if he is not “dazzled” by what the painting supposedly represents) will perceive, in his radical singularity.

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