

Book Review

**Emmanuel Alloa, *Rezistența sensibilului. Merleau-Ponty și critica transparenței*, Oradea: Ratio & Revelatio, 2025,
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The Romanian translation of Emmanuel Alloa's book entitled the *Resistance of the Sensible* provides the reader with an overview of the key concepts of Merleau-Ponty's developing thought. Not only does the author of the book touch upon several aspects that have been overlooked by the current exegesis, but he also provides a unitary view on Merleau-Ponty's idea of transparency, as is found in the corpus of his work. Moreover, Alloa suggests some critical remarks concerning how Merleau-Ponty's thought can be enriched by comparing it with research stemming from psychology, linguistics and the history of philosophy. For example, the last chapter of his book compares the thematization of Aristotle with the late thinking of Merleau-Ponty, to finally propose the notion of "diaphenomenology" as emblematic of the French phenomenologist's thinking.

Alloa commences with the simple, yet definitory question of what does perceptual evidence exactly mean? We can just think of Merleau-Ponty's early *magnum opus* entitled the *Phenomenology of Perception*, wherein the French philosopher engages with the framework of Husserl, at the same time, advancing theories which have



their origin in psychiatry or psychology. Perceptual evidence designates, first and foremost, the givenness of the object as something coherent, permanent and constant. It is what is before our eyes, contrasting and opposing us. We could just remember Ponty's famous glossing from the *Visible and the Invisible* that "I have faith in what is perceived", thus, starting with Merleau-Ponty late phenomenological ontology, we could also discuss the notion of perceptual faith in the world.

Alloa's book also provides us with certain hints concerning how we should read Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre, thus the author suggests, following Ponty's reading of Eugen Fink, an author also present in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, that wonder is precisely the starting point of philosophy, at which we can arrive by loosening our intentional threads which bind us to the world. Therefore, the experience of philosophical thinking would be an utterly strange experience. This strange experience shakes the foundations of our familiarity with the world, introducing us into the philosophical realm *per se*.

The author emphasizes that the notion of transparency is not found in any glossary pertaining to the key concepts of Merleau-Ponty, whereas for Alloa, it is precisely transparency which can be called the leitmotif of Ponty's work. Therefore, we could discuss transparency in relation to ourselves, with the world and with others. Even though the current exegesis identifies several stages of Ponty's work, Alloa argues for the continuity of the former's oeuvre, suggesting that it is precisely perception which provides the unitary aspect of Ponty's corpus.

For example, even though some scholars argue for an expressive or ontological turn, Alloa manages to demonstrate that the very first writings of Ponty reveal his main interests and areas of research, which will follow him throughout his life.

In the *Structure of Behavior*, Alloa argues that Ponty's gesture is rather unusual, because the entire book consists in an engagement with Gestalt psychology, the bibliography excluding any philosophical source or reference, while psychiatric, psychological and neurological references seem to reign over Ponty's early inquiry into perception.

From this book onwards, Ponty will subsequently argue that philosophy should entertain a permanent dialogue with the empirical sciences, not to intermingle with them, but rather, to provide several examples of how a philosophical idea can be grounded.

Advancing towards the second main book of Ponty, the whole purpose of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is to describe how the embodiment of perception enables our dwelling in the world, and how it renders possible experience as such.

Thus, Ponty's main claim would refer itself to a sort of primacy of perception over the other faculties or acts of the human being.

The abovementioned usage of the notion of dwelling is not arbitrary, because the second step in Alloa's analysis depicts the relation of embodied perception with the environment. Like other philosophers before him, Ponty's draws on the work of certain biologists concerning the notion of environment, to find empirical evidence for his philosophical claims concerning perception and embodiment. Anticipating, the discussion aims to unpack the notion of environment, which will be taken up again in the final chapter of Alloa's book, wherein the conjunction between the writings of Ponty and those of Aristotle becomes most evident.

In the chapter concerning the passage from environment to world, Alloa attempts to answer a question which was posed before him by many other authors, namely what exactly does the body mean? We can state for the moment that we know our body to be ours, and moreover, we can experience it either from the outside or from the inside. Alloa challenges the perspective in which the body is posed as something that we possess, rather we are, as existing beings in the world, a body, thereby embodiment is addressed. Alloa then reiterates the distinction which is to be found in Husserl's work, between the lived body and the objective body. While the lived body is, so to speak, the experiencing body, the objective body represents the body as subsumed under the laws of physics, or more precisely, the body experienced at the third person, whereas the lived body designates first and foremost the first-person phenomenological perspective. Alloa does not overlook the importance of the objective body, for phenomena described by Merleau-Ponty, but rather, he insists on the importance of lived experience, in conjunction with the objective body, thereof lived experience would be paramount.

Tracing the steps of von Uexküll, Alloa reinterprets Ponty's account as one in which the lived body marks the passage from the mere environment to the world construed as a unitary whole. The body is first and foremost an opening to the world, which transcends the mere environment in which one lives, to open the experience of multiple and possible horizons of experience, which end up in constituting our world as such.

In the chapter concerning the problem of transcendence, Ponty advances a rather bold claim, inspired by the overall system of Kantian criticism, thus he writes that transcendental philosophy, as a philosophical discipline, should be grounded anew. Alloa acknowledges the paradox behind Ponty's statement, since the latter's philosophy would fit into what Kant has called pre-critical philosophy. This happens because Ponty insists on the importance of empirical science, as a means for philosophical questioning, his main interest being situated in the region of the

pre-reflexive. What Ponty had exactly in mind was not a continuation of the Kantian criticism, but rather a rethinking of the question of the transcendental. For example, in his *Phenomenology of perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues for the significant role of transcendental philosophy, for unpacking the conditions of possibility of our experience, although, it seems to overlook the effective givenness of these experiences. As Alloa correctly observes, in the criticist system, no place is allotted to the issue of real exteriority. Exteriority is presupposed, but never posed as such, thereby the transcendental ego is conceived as utterly anonymous. This anonymity designates the fact that this ego is neither in me, nor in the other. Ponty's appraisal of Kantianism points to the thesis that his project was not fully accomplished as such.

Stressing the Kantian a priori, Ponty considers that the former introduces somehow hierarchization from within his system, thus rendering possible the knowledge of the world, although without a direct experience of it, i.e. the world. As Kant writes, the subject, be it transcendental, should be somehow situated before the world, his main role being that of a legislator, in the philosophical sense of the term. Ponty further finds Husserl's critique of Kant to be a justification of his overall account of perception, because as Husserl observes, Kant neglects the multiple forms of human sociality, culture and community.

Ponty finds once again support in Fink's assessment of the question concerning the transcendental, hence, the latter writes that contrary to the Kantian account of this issue, the transcendental should be conceived as the facticity of being engaged in the world. Moreover, Ponty agrees with Fink's statement that the transcendental subject should be regarded as an intra-ontic being. Henceforth, the transcendental reduction is never fully accomplished, but rather, it designates a perpetual process of questioning.

We can only think about the world insofar as we have the experience of it, not only formally or in a transcendental manner. Ponty turns towards Husserl's text about the earth that does not move to find the necessary ground onto which this experience can be consolidated. Ponty is very attentive in establishing the relation between the earth and the body, thus, our experience of the world, since it takes place on the earth is eminently an embodied one.

We are quickly approaching the distinction between transcendence as such and the transcendental realm of experience. If transcendence refers to the pre-critical dogmatic principle, the transcendental investigates the epistemological standpoint of critical philosophy.

The next section of Alloa's book tackles the issue of language as it is found throughout Ponty's developing thought. From the very outset, Ponty considered the body to be a means to expression, thus we ought to gloss the wording of expressive

body. Ponty's great achievement consists in, writes Alloa, the way in which he established the relation between consciousness, body and expression through his notion of intentional motricity. Situating himself in the tradition inaugurated by Husserl, Ponty argues that through the body, consciousness expresses an "I can" and not an "I think that". Therefore, embodiment would be paramount, while opinions and beliefs would be secondary or even derivative.

In a similar vein to Wittgenstein's late descriptions, which bear a certain phenomenological stamp, Ponty considers that the expression of anger or a smile depict the coincidence of the idea and the expression. This sort of interpretation comes prior to the symbolically and culturally mediated forms of communication. The problem of language cannot be thought outside the problem of the expressive body, as the *Phenomenology of Perception* attests. As Alloa considers, the phrase used by Wittgenstein denoting the "language at work" applies also to Ponty's thought. Language is not a medium for communication, but rather a manifestation of our lived and expressive body. Henceforth, there exists certain manifestations of language which do not serve a pragmatic outcome such as communicating one's ideas about a subject. Paramount for this case wherein language is not strictly a pragmatic tool is the example of silence, which might even transmit more than a verbal expression of a statement.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful expressions pertaining to Ponty's corpus, which is reiterated by Alloa is that man will never feel at home in painting in the way he feels the familiarity of language. Merleau-Ponty was very attentive towards works of art, and to the lives of the artists, but also to the specific language of the poets, thereby he acknowledged the familiarity of language over the strangeness of the work of art.

The next chapter of Alloa's book wraps up the discussion by proposing a thorough analysis of Ponty's ontology of the visible. First and foremost, Alloa appeals to the example of the artists, to show how Ponty's main intention was to circumscribe the region of the visible, by bringing together art and nature. As the examples provided by Ponty clearly show, Cézanne's landscape is not just a meeting between one's regard and a stance of nature, but rather, Cézanne's paintings represent a universe in becoming. As Ponty explains, these paintings of landscapes turn our attention towards a pre-world, to a world not yet humanized, i.e. to the natural world. Perception is already a stylization, because it transcends the dichotomy between receptivity and activity. Ponty agrees with Husserl that style does not reveal a particular style of a particular ego, but rather the style of one's world, world being here construed as being-in-the-world, and not as some of private landscape, to use another of Ponty's wordings. In a Heideggerian framework of thought, being-in-the-world

means always and already to make the world, according to this or that style of dwelling. Alloa's next observation resonates with Renaud Barbaras' interpretation of the flesh, when the former argues that there exists a strange similarity between the earth, as described by Husserl, and one's lived body.

Even though this correlation seems tenable, Alloa further strengthens the thesis that we should understand the body and the world as being made up of the same material. Although the emphasis is being put on the world, we could also consider the body (the flesh) to be something which is rendered possible by the world, and not vice versa. Thus, we do not have a world because we have a body, but rather our being-in-the-world permits one to access one's body. Alloa reminds us of Derrida's idea that auto-affection seems to represent the archaic and primitive scene of phenomenology, in a similar vein to Michel Henry's thematization. On the other hand, Barbaras would insist on the peculiar role played by hetero-affection, thus we are left with the question as to whether auto-affection is paramount. For Merleau-Ponty the dichotomy between auto-affection and hetero-affection seems to be a false dilemma, because in his later work, particularly in the *Visible and the Invisible* he discusses reversibility in relation with touching one's hand and being touched at the same time. Alloa seems to endorse this last point, when discussing the main attributes of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty even calls the reversibility of the flesh by the name of an absolute truth. As Alloa correctly observes, reversibility is to be coupled with the notion of chasm. Criticizing Levinas' assessment of Merleau-Ponty's chasm, Alloa suggests that even though the two notions of chasm and reversibility operate together, the chasm cannot be reduced to a mere specular reversibility.

The last chapter of Alloa's book coincides with his proposal for a "diaphenomenology". He retraces Ponty's steps back to Husserl, precisely when the father of phenomenology suggests that the forgetfulness of things is a consequence of the forgetfulness of their intuitive environment and of the forgetfulness of the subject. The forgetfulness of the subject will become for Heidegger the very forgetfulness of being. Following Ponty's steps, Alloa coins, alongside the author of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the phrase forgetfulness of the sensible. Alloa draws attention to the phenomenon of the perceptual field, wherein the forgetting of it brings attention to the very presence of an object. The world is not first and foremost the totality of beings, but rather the very horizon from within beings manifest themselves.

To conclude, Alloa's highly original interpretation of Ponty's work proves itself to be of great aid not only to the ones who wish to engage, for the first time, with Merleau-Ponty's overall thought, construed as a unitary whole, but also to the ones who want to find arguments which might reinforce their claims in developing Ponty's thinking further. Already in the last chapter of his book, Alloa provided certain

hints towards the rapprochement, for example, of the works of Ponty and Aristotle, under the rubric of “diaphenomenology”, a novel perspective upon the thought of the author of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which will, in the end, strengthen Alloa’s standpoint.

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