

Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy

An Introduction

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Despite the premature interruption of his work, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) has left a lasting mark on twentieth-century thinking. Thanks to a large body of scholarship on his thought after his death, he is now part of the canon and a key figure within both phenomenology and twentieth-century philosophy more broadly. In addition, his own readings of the history of philosophy continue to attract interest and he has also become an authoritative reference in many other fields of research. This last point deserves to be stressed: at a time when philosophy is increasingly being institutionalized and reduced to its so-called core competencies, we should recall that Merleau-Ponty's place in the canon is due in large part to the breadth of his studies, including his ability to implicate philosophy in the sciences and vice versa. That he steadfastly refuses to marginalize both what is central to philosophy and other practices of knowledge betrays a point about what philosophy is and what counts as philosophy. Rather than proceeding from a systematic core which he later merely applied to other fields, Merleau-Ponty engaged in a demanding encounter between philosophy and other disciplines to such an extent that he reconceptualized some of philosophy's most central concerns. He has now become, in other words, a canonical philosopher precisely because he opposes neither the traditional principles and foundations of philosophy nor the new sciences of his time and the intellectual enigmas they generated.

That the sciences are able to reorganize philosophy implies that, to Merleau-Ponty, philosophy is not the “absolute science” to which the natural sciences would merely be relative. In fact, Merleau-Ponty seems to operate with a thoroughly contemporary notion of both philosophy and all other epistemic practices. It is this fundamental reconceptualization of philosophy, and all of the new possible lines of investigation such reconceptualization opens, which seems to us most alive today.

In light of this fundamental shift, this volume is not an overarching survey of interdisciplinary interests, but it defends a central thesis that serves as a through-line: Merleau-Ponty’s work involves a certain reinvigoration of philosophy that opens toward some of the contemporary issues with which we are still to this day concerned. The explorations of the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy, as Merleau-Ponty called what might also be termed philosophy’s “outside,” have been praised for their methodological topicality, for a metatheoretical reflection about the relationship between forms of knowledge. Moreover, as this volume shows, Merleau-Ponty’s writings not only yield metatheoretical insights concerning methods but also remain relevant in terms of concrete ideas, for example in the many inventive conceptual attempts for moving beyond the dualism of nature and culture or reconciling objective sciences and first-person experience.

It is no doubt true that, since his voice fell silent in the last century, contemporary philosophers have been turning their attention to a set of newly formulated questions that at first glance would seem alien to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Most importantly, Merleau-Ponty’s early death coincided with the emergence of a new generation of thinkers that defined themselves by way of a sharp demarcation from a certain phenomenological tradition to which Merleau-Ponty belongs. Some of these demarcations have become famous and might indeed give the impression that his work is obsolete. In order to motivate the thesis of this volume, it is important for us to address directly some of the arguments put forward by those who assert that Merleau-Ponty’s work is outmoded. There are three such arguments we would like to mention here, all of which have to do with a misunderstanding of phenomenology or the sense in which Merleau-Ponty is called a phenomenologist.

The first kind of criticism harks back to an argument repeatedly voiced against phenomenology’s naïveté since the 1960s. Michel Foucault complained that phenomenology is incapable of addressing the materiality of discourse, and thus the formations of knowledge and power or the themes of domination and exclusion. Gilles Deleuze in turn opposed “meat,” with

all its crudeness, to Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh." "The flesh," Deleuze jokes, "is too tender." More generally, phenomenology has often been seen as incapable of thinking the material, the hardness of objects and the violence of history.

The second line of criticism sees phenomenology in an essentialist and therefore genetic manner: in this view, phenomenology is determined by its origins in Husserl's transcendental idealism. This criticism has gained traction again, especially through the argument put forward in Speculative Realism that phenomenology subordinates what things are to the way they appear to a subject. According to this line of thinking, any philosophy that starts by describing phenomena ends up being caught in the spell of idealism, and proves incapable of reaching out to reality and its concrete objects.

The third kind of criticism relies on a methodological notion of phenomenology as determined and exhausted by its emphasis on description. In this view, phenomenology is of exclusive interest to the empirically-informed strands of naturalistic philosophy, and fundamentally unable to build itself into a worldview comprehensive enough to account for phenomena beyond description, or unable to draw any generalizable accounts of the world, let alone anything like an ontology or a metaphysics. In short: phenomenology would be, at best, a preliminary level on the way to a conceptual analysis, and at worst, an antiphilosophical tendency within philosophy.

While all three criticisms are misconstructions of phenomenology as a whole, it is not the purpose of this volume to restate the aims of phenomenology as a worthwhile method. In any case, our defense of Merleau-Ponty against such critiques is far simpler: this is not the kind of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty is or thought himself to be. Indeed, his writings deliberately set phenomenology into relief as the study of phenomena that ultimately pushes phenomenology to its own limits. Some readers even go as far as to say that he is in fact not a phenomenologist (assuming that phenomenology should be understood in the terms outlined above). Merleau-Ponty himself would rather disagree with the description of phenomenology from which he seems to be excused, but he would most certainly also like to reject any ethically, politically, or metaphysically deflationary view of reality (as goes the first criticism). He would just as well dispute that phenomenology is essentially committed to transcendental idealism, and he definitely considers ontology the natural horizon of phenomenology, not an exit from it. Let us pursue this last claim a bit farther.

When Husserl describes the move from the natural to the phenomenological sphere, he remarks that, "[b]etween consciousness and reality there

yawns a veritable abyss of sense.”¹ While Husserl most definitely thinks that this abyss only serves as a reason to supplant the science of reality with the science of consciousness, in a certain sense he leaves the nature of such an abyss itself uninvestigated. Whereas, for Merleau-Ponty, the proper phenomenological question would have to be: What is the sense of such an abyss? To what extent is intentionality irreducible to a naturalistic conception of the real while at the same time granting consciousness its very place *within* reality? To what extent is intentionality a feature of the sensible world itself rather than just of consciousness? In what sense is the sensible world a world of differences (allowing for things to emerge in contrast to a background) and of continuity (as the very ground that allows for things to emerge)? For Merleau-Ponty, these are questions of a relation between thought and the very world that remains independent from it. They are also not merely questions of the place of human thought in the nonhuman world but also of the *separation* between them. Indeed, what makes Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology unique is that he seems to at least want to think through this separation itself—to think from within the veritable abyss of sense that Husserl claims yawns between consciousness and reality. In other words, it seems that precisely this ambiguity of separation leads Merleau-Ponty to venture to the limits of the Husserlian phenomenology he inherited, and to inaugurate a series of new problems that have proven inspirational for contemporary thought.

The first thing that must be noted, when reappraising Merleau-Ponty’s legacy for the current century, is that the situation is significantly different from the time when, in the 1960s and 1970s, his thinking was by and large either ignored or thought to be hopelessly dated. In the last two or three decades, the interest in Merleau-Ponty has been continuously growing, both within philosophical scholarship and in other fields of research. Besides, intellectual history has made significant progress, and the often-polemical rejections of Merleau-Ponty by authors such as Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, or Derrida are now taken with a pinch of salt, as it has now become evident how influential he has been for the subsequent generation of French thinkers. Uncontestably, the richer notion of phenomenology which Merleau-Ponty’s thought points to offers potent perspectives when placed against the backdrop of the current “ontological turn” that can be witnessed in anthropology and the social sciences. But other aspects of this thinking are being reconsidered too. With the publication of many of Merleau-Ponty’s lecture courses and posthumous working notes over the last few years, researchers have gained access to completely new materials that clarify the ways Merleau-Ponty

breathed new life into metaphysics and ontology, even before the generation of thinkers that followed him, and the uncanny way that his thinking prefigured theirs. Just as in the 1960s readers were left with the fragmentary yet fascinating working notes from *The Visible and the Invisible* collected by Claude Lefort, today the scripts from the courses at the Collège de France as well as other archival materials or interviews released in the last decade or two have provided an ever more detailed picture of the manifold aspect of Merleau-Ponty's intellectual forays. When we scan the bounty of the current secondary literature on such posthumous materials, we are struck by the fact that it is rarely just philological or historical and that Merleau-Ponty's posthumous writing always gestures to new and different kinds of thought that may not be so explicit in his published work. Whether it be the lectures on institution and passivity, nature, the sensible world and the world of expression, or on the literary uses of language, Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes are continuously—and rightfully—being mined for new insights pertaining to everything from history, to psychoanalysis, aesthetics, and evolutionary biology.

Such historical and bibliographical facts count as an invitation to consider anew the possibility that Merleau-Ponty's work still speaks to us and that the sound of his thought still rings in our ears. Not only does the criticism that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is merely a naturalistic worldview seem ludicrous; the recently reappraised reflections on historical dialectics show that processes of emancipation, political organization, and revolutionary events were never out of his sight. However, although the Merleau-Ponty scholarship has recently unearthed such underexplored venues, the connections to current debates still need to be made. This is what this volume aims to do. *Merleau-Ponty and Contemporary Philosophy* cuts across the different loci of contemporary continental philosophy and provides an assessment of the innovative research of today. The purpose of this book is to show how Merleau-Ponty offers hitherto unexplored resources to address some of the pressing questions of our time and to acknowledge how some of our current concerns can find unexpected resources in his work. This book aims at clarifying some of the unfinished, loose, or simply hitherto unheard aspects of the philosopher's thought, and an exploration of their less visible relevance to contemporary philosophy.

Thus, this volume chronicles the continuities that connect our current intellectual world to Merleau-Ponty's thinking without reducing one to the other. In order to gain a better understanding of Merleau-Ponty's intellectual legacy, it is necessary to draw different perspectives on his oeuvre. The present

volume gathers fifteen representative voices from continental philosophy today, some from Merleau-Ponty scholars and some from others who come to his work through their own thematic interests. The point is not to propose a unified “new Merleau-Ponty,” but rather to remain sensitive both to the gaps and the crossings, to the chasms and chiasms, at work between seemingly disconnected fields. Some of the key themes with which the book is concerned, as evidenced by the table of contents, include: ontology, epistemology, anthropology, embodiment, animality, politics, language, aesthetics, and art. These are but a few areas for which Merleau-Ponty’s writings have opened up new and different approaches. While our attempt cannot claim to be an exhaustive resource on the work of Merleau-Ponty, it offers a selection of some of the most creative current analyses of his thought.

The Texts

This book is organized along four main sections: “Legacies,” “Mind and Nature,” “Politics, Power, Institution,” and “Art and Creation,” each of which attempts to document Merleau-Ponty’s legacy for some of our present philosophical concerns. These sections are rounded off by an epilogue by Jean-Luc Nancy (“Merleau-Ponty, an Attempt at a Response”).

Legacies

What are Merleau-Ponty’s legacies for contemporary thinking? The contributions contained in this section do much to support what we described above as our central thesis, namely, that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology serves to reinvigorate a set of philosophical concerns that we continue to have. To start with, due to his incessant efforts to locate our bodily condition at the heart of any sense-experience, Merleau-Ponty has most obviously contributed to rehabilitating corporeality. The body, he asserts, is our “general medium” for having a world. The world is itself, first and foremost, what we perceive through the means of our bodily condition. Merleau-Ponty’s idea of embodiment already cuts through the dualisms of mind and matter, insofar as it implies a form of oriented movement which locates the birth of intentionality on a prelinguistic, bodily level.

To Merleau-Ponty, the life of consciousness is inseparable from an embodied, situated, and desiring being. The motility of the body points toward a motor intentionality (*intentionnalité motrice*) which is the primordial

way to relate to a world of objects and beings. As a result, issues of cognition can never be ultimately separated from drives and other living forces, since there is a permanent interplay between life and desire, perception and action, movement and expression, depth and meaning. While Edmund Husserl stressed the necessity for the subject to “return to the things themselves,” Merleau-Ponty wanted to highlight the many situations where the subject is called upon by the things themselves. The contributions of this section focus on some central concepts contemporary philosophy inherits from Merleau-Ponty, such as that of “flesh” (*la chair*), as well as his analysis of temporality; it also indicates how new insights can be gained from Merleau-Ponty’s accounts of how experiences come about, both in terms of how things come into view and how correlatively subjects come into being.

Merleau-Ponty’s arguably most widely known conceptual invention is arguably “the flesh” (*la chair*), which has generated many critical discussions in contemporary philosophy. As Renaud Barbaras argues in “The Three Senses of Flesh,” Merleau-Ponty’s own ambiguity concerning the meaning of “flesh” has led to two opposing interpretations. The first one reads *la chair* as a faithful retranslation of the Husserlian idea of *Leib* as the experiential body, but then we find ourselves with the strange concept of a “flesh of the world”: the reversible structure of embodiment (my own body is both sentient and sensed) cannot be extended to the world at large without turning the world itself into a sentient being (some aspects of this hypothesis are discussed in this volume by McWeeny). The other reading takes “flesh” to be distinct from the “personal body,” and to be the name for a generalized account of the texture of the world in its sensible (yet not sentient) condition. However, Barbaras states, these two senses (the ontic one and the ontological one) can only be explained through a third, transcendental one. Flesh belongs neither to the subject nor to the world alone, it is rather a dynamic of life, which shares a same structure with the dynamic of desire. Indeed, the specificity of desire is that it only ever tends to something insofar as this thing is not yet present, to desire means to project oneself toward something that evades givenness. The very notion of the world should be thought as dynamic: beyond the flesh of the subject and the subject of the world, flesh should be thought *as* world.

Barbaras’s plea for a dynamic reading of flesh generally raises the question of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of temporality and of becoming. In “The Vortex of Time,” Bernhard Waldenfels and Regula Giuliani ponder what Merleau-Ponty’s legacy can be for a radical reconception of time. Cutting into the modern opposition between objective and subjective time, the question

is how to make space for both the unity and the paradoxical character of temporal structures. Against linear accounts of time, which are to be found both in the externalist and in the psychological accounts, Waldenfels and Giuliani elicit the many resources that Merleau-Ponty offers throughout his work for an alternative picture of time. From the radical ontological meditation of the late writings one can follow the temporal thread backward, into the early works: what emerges in this comprehensive reading is the idea of time as a swirling vortex. Taking into consideration insights from psychoanalysis, structuralism, and psychopathology, they show what it might entail to proceed to a thoroughly *temporal* rethinking of embodied experience. Merleau-Ponty's critique of traditional conceptions of time remains faithful to a certain idea of phenomenology: neither object nor fact, time is neither a form nor a content of experience; from a phenomenological perspective, one must say that time is what *appears in passing*. In "Undergoing an Experience. Sensing, Bodily Affordances, and the Institution of the Self," Emmanuel Alloa aims at showing why Merleau-Ponty's critique of sensation cannot be disentangled from a radical redefinition of subjectivity. Connecting the early criticism of sense data with the later explorations around the notion of "institution," the point is to show how a self is not a mere receptacle for sensory contents but is instituted as a self through the very experiences it undergoes. Experience is not a thing we "do" or "have," but something we go through and something through which we become what we are. From a recapitulation of Merleau-Ponty's account of sense-emergence as a Gestaltist process and the analysis of the negative, diacritical structure of the experiential field, the argument moves to the mute demands of sensible environments ("affordances") and the types of embodied responsiveness they call for. As Alloa argues, affective, "pathic" events that touch the subject are also what brings the subject into existence. Consequently, subjectivity appears as the field of becoming, a becoming shaped through sensible requests and instituted by means of the creative responses given to the requests put forward by other beings, things, and subjects.

Among the questions left open by Merleau-Ponty's writings is how philosophical language may adequately express the reality of experience. In his chapter "Between Sense and Non-Sense: Merleau-Ponty and 'The Silence of the Absolute Language,'" Stephen Watson takes up the claim that philosophy in fact requires an orientation not only to its language but to the fact that its language fails to express its meaning. In that case, Watson writes, a "transcendence of the sensible becomes as much lure as *caesura*." It becomes both that which language means as well as that which

it cannot possibly express. But this excess does not precede language so much as it is gathered within and by language. This would be a limit or break within linguistic meaning that shows up or is produced only in language, and which thus has many points of access. If philosophy is supposed to highlight its production of its own caesura, as we learn from Watson's chapter, this entails an undermining of philosophy seen as the pursuit of some preexisting absolute.

Mind and Nature

Merleau-Ponty is often credited with having ventured into a topic that has since become ever more timely: the concept of nature. Lately, his lecture courses at the Collège de France from 1956–1960, his in-depth forays into biology and animal behavior, along with his more general interrogations on a new concept of nature, have been reappraised. These lectures have set the scene for a thorough reconsideration of what life, materiality, and consciousness mean. In this second section, three authors assess Merleau-Ponty's legacy for current debates about the naturalization of the mind, the extent to which matter itself is animated (the so-called question of "panpsychism") and, finally, the debate about animal communication.

While the phenomenological idea of intentionality has often been taken as a rebuke of the ambitions of reductionist naturalistic accounts, Jocelyn Benoist suggests that Merleau-Ponty's work may be naturalized to a certain extent. In "The Truth of Naturalism," Benoist suggests that, while it would be hard to deny some truth to the thesis of the mental—i.e., "there is some intentional region in the world"—this does not exclude the possibility that there might be some ontological truth to naturalism. One does not need to wait for the late, explicitly ontological ponderings for this: already in the early book *Structure of Behaviour*, Benoist explains, we find the idea that any embodied meaning sustains a being and is sustained by it all at once. By choosing behavior as a starting point, the cards are reshuffled between naturalism and a philosophy of consciousness: behavior is nothing but consciousness in nature, mind in the world. If intentionality is an emergent phenomenon that has its origin in nature itself, it means intentionality cannot exhaust nature. Nature should then be taken as the name for that which escapes full intentional grasp, while also being that in which any meaning is steeped.

In her contribution, "The Panpsychism Question in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology," Jennifer McWeeny explores one way of saving Merleau-Ponty's

ontology from the criticisms leveled at it by Barbaras by arguing that the notion of “flesh” points toward a panpsychic conception of Being. With respect to the possibility of using his philosophy for a holistic understanding of nature, much indeed hinges on whether mindlike qualities are restricted to the human realm or whether they should be extended to matter at large. In the wake of recent philosophical trends such as new materialisms, speculative realism, feminist phenomenology, and environmentalism, McWeeny discusses the available ways to give a panpsychist reading of the notion of flesh and outlines the ontological, ethical, and political consequences of such an interpretation. Showing continuities and ruptures with authors from Descartes and Leibniz, James, Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze, the chapter also locates the point at which an interrogation of mindlike structures must impose itself in classical and phenomenological philosophies of consciousness.

In “Merleau-Ponty and Biosemiotics. From the Issue of Meaning in Living Beings to a New Deal between Science and Metaphysics,” Annabelle Dufourcq confronts Merleau-Ponty’s forays into animal life with the advances in biosemiotics, opening up fruitful reconceptualizations of what signification means in the domain of life at large. In a movement that reverses the traditional tendency to refer everything back to the human, Dufourcq points out that one might just as well wish to regard the human as a sign of the natural. In so doing, her contribution echoes Benoist’s plea for a renaturalized phenomenology as well as McWeeny’s suggestion that panpsychism need not mean anthropomorphism. This involves taking seriously the claims made by biosemioticians such as Adolf Portmann or Jakob von Uexküll, who were able to show the extent to which animals live in a world of meaning and signs, which undercuts any mechanistic understanding of their form of life. Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the world is meaning, as Dufourcq shows, can be understood reductively as a statement of defiance toward any talk of the “thing-in-itself”; but conversely it could be seen to expand the world of meaning to all existing entities, including animals, and plants too.

Politics, Power, Institution

After decades in which scholarship has by and large ignored Merleau-Ponty’s explicitly political writings, we can currently witness a return to these matters. As some commentators have stressed, beyond his topical articles that dealing with the pressing matters of his time, Merleau-Ponty also devised an ambitious ontology of power, the implications of which still need to be fully unfolded. “There is no power which has an absolute basis,” writes

Merleau-Ponty in his “Note on Macchiavelli.”² This constitutes the starting point for an entire line of postfoundational thinking, of which Merleau-Ponty’s disciple Claude Lefort was the first representative.

In “The Institution of the Law. Merleau-Ponty and Lefort,” Bernard Flynn returns to the ominous question that has haunted the tradition for so long, namely, the relationship between nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*). Any law is faced with the constitutive paradox that it cannot legitimate its own inaugural institution but needs to resort to an “outside” to justify itself. If the paradigm of political theology, so minutely analyzed by Lefort, is to be rejected, then the only possible “outside” available is nature. But this would be a misunderstanding of nature, one in which nature is reduced to a self-identical, static object facing human conventions. On the contrary, and echoing a theme that runs through all the previous contributions, a conception of nature as life contains the resources for an internal form of transcendence: human laws are not added on top of nature but it is by nature that humans are political. This chiasm forces us to rethink the very notion of institution as cutting across the nature-culture divide: to live is to establish, violate, contest, and abide by laws. It is the illusion that we could find an ultimately secured ground that severs us from life itself, not the reverse.

In his contribution “Post-Truth Politics and the Paradox of Power,” Frank Chouraqui wonders what kind of responses philosophy has to offer to the apparent irrationality of manmade decisions (both individual and collective). For there is a form of rationalism that is refuted by the mere existence of irrationality. One such fact is the phenomenon of post-truth, in which the presumed correspondence between credibility and support is shattered. On the contrary, such phenomena demonstrate that adhesion is not indexed on trust or belief: power is not truth-sensitive. For Chouraqui, Merleau-Ponty provides the tools to contend with such radically unsettling phenomena, for his engagement with political irrationality has led him to challenge the widely accepted view that truth-recognition precedes reality-constitution and that political adhesion follows from truth-attribution. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty shows that recognition and constitution are equiprimordial moments unified in the most fundamental structure of being called “perceptual faith.” The world as it appears to us, even as it presents recognition in contradistinction to constitution, is only derived from their originary unity. The political sphere is organized by their unity and by its interactions with the illusion of their disunity.

A central, yet still insufficiently theorized notion in Merleau-Ponty’s writings is that of “institution” (*Stiftung* or *Ur-Stiftung*). Merleau-Ponty

understands institution in a broad and elementary way, as both the *instituted form* and the *instituting process*. Situating herself within an ongoing current discussion about the uses of Merleau-Ponty's notion of "institution," Sara Ahmed suggests connecting it with habit and its normalizing effects. In her contribution "Institutional Habits. About Bodies and Orientations that Don't Fit," Ahmed proposes a practical phenomenology of habituation, with direct reference to diversity work. By stressing all the moments where bodies do not fit into the places intended for them, a contingent moment of the emergence and shaping of an institution becomes visible. The encounter with de-oriented, *queer* bodies not only highlights implicit normativity; it also opens up a space for reorientation, inspiring ways of critically coming up against institutions.

Art and Creation

It is frequently pointed out that Merleau-Ponty's work yields precious resources for a better understanding of the phenomenon of expression. Just when Jean-Paul Sartre proposed his essentialist account of literature, Merleau-Ponty refused Sartre's alternative between (direct) prose and (indirect) poetry, and rather sought to interrogate the genesis of meaning, returning to the creative and expressive moments beneath the surface of discourse. Expression would thus not so much amount to the transference of an internal state into an outside form (*ex-pressio*). It is, rather, an occurrence wherein something already in view but overlooked is presented as if for the first time. Such a task is of course not limited to literature: besides the close attention he pays to literary expression, painting, cinema, and the visual arts in general are incontestably among Merleau-Ponty's most privileged objects of attention. He suggests in "Eye and Mind," for example: "in *paintings* themselves we could seek a *figured philosophy*."³ Since their publication, Merleau-Ponty's writings on visual arts have always stirred keen interest, inspiring generations of viewers and theorists. The last section of the volume presents some of the latest advances in aesthetics concerning, among other things, the status of the work of art in a museological context, Merleau-Ponty's rediscovered theory of cinema, and aesthetics as a space for dissensus.

In "Art after the Sublime in Merleau-Ponty and André Breton: Aesthetics and the Politics of *Mad Love*," Galen Johnson provides an exegesis of the critical role that surrealism plays in Merleau-Ponty's thought, and more specifically André Breton's semiautobiographical novel *Mad Love (L'amour fou)*. As a recently published volume of interviews with Merleau-Ponty con-

firms,⁴ surrealist aesthetics were an inspirational resource for him, both in the larger context of his project of elucidating the “prose of truth” and for the sake of his reconceptualisation of dialogic philosophy. Johnson manages to explain that, against all expectations, surrealist aesthetics, so often associated with the *écriture automatique*, does not lead to soliloquy but is conceived of as dialogic from the outset (“the forms of Surrealist language adapt themselves best to dialogue,” as Breton claims in the *Surrealist Manifesto*). Along these lines, Johnson stresses how, against skepticism, authoritarianism, and moralism, the confrontation with surrealism was an important step toward Merleau-Ponty’s reconception of intersubjectivity, coexistence, and the “flesh of the political.”

In the chapter “Institution and Critique of the Museum in ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,’” Rajiv Kaushik discusses Merleau-Ponty’s critique of “the museum” as a hegemonic force. Recalling the discussion of André Malraux’s project of a *Museum without Walls*, Kaushik examines Merleau-Ponty’s critique of decontextualization and dehistoricization. Although this critique was formulated with respect to its time, Kaushik points out, Merleau-Ponty’s arguments remain valid, and contemporary curators would do well to reckon with it. However, without having to defend some sort of historicist contextualization of artworks, the point is to stress the lateral connections between objects and experiences. For the ontology at stake in Merleau-Ponty’s various treatments of art is one that is inseparable from his hermeneutics and politics, since this being is *in fact opened up by* all kinds of difference (linguistic, symbolic, ethical, political) without those differences having to conform to one another.

For Mauro Carbone, the time has come to confront one of the most celebrated theories of cinema—Gilles Deleuze’s—with the lesser-known developments in Merleau-Ponty’s thought on the artform. As Carbone suggests in “Deleuze’s ‘Philosophy-Cinema’: A Variation on Merleau-Ponty’s ‘A-Philosophy?’” Merleau-Ponty stands as something of a “dark precursor” to Deleuze’s ambitious ontology of cinema. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s lecture delivered in 1945, alongside other text fragments, lays the ground for understanding what Merleau-Ponty calls an “implicit philosophy” at work in cinematic oeuvres. This perspective not only offers precious hints for understanding the specificity of film, it also gestures towards a more general fact: against the backdrop of his own “screen philosophy,” Carbone highlights that ideas can only be experienced by encountering them in one of their sensible manifestations, on some kind of “screen” or “veil.” Screens are not just hindrances, then, but conditions of possibility of thinking.

In the fourth and last chapter of this section, Veronique Fóti offers some suggestions on the connections between ethics and aesthetics. In her contribution, “Strong Beauty: In Face of Structures of Exclusion,” Fóti begins with asking what we are to do with the notion of beauty today. If this notion is to mean anything, she argues, it has to be understood as a radically unanticipable, event-like experience one is seized by. Although Merleau-Ponty has not made beauty a central category of his aesthetics, the confrontative dimension associated with this definition of “strong beauty” can easily be reconnected with his analyses of Paul Cézanne, while echoing the work of Agnes Martin, Ellsworth Kelly, or Natvar Bhavsar. Such experience of strong beauty is the experience of extreme strength and fragility at once, thereby opening up a space for resilience. According to Fóti, art has an ethical dimension where it produces a consciousness for “refraction,” that is, that totality is shattered, leaving us with the necessity of permanently recomposing ourselves. *Sensus* has *dissensus* as its precondition.

These four sections are finally punctuated by an epilogue by Jean-Luc Nancy titled “Merleau-Ponty: An Attempt at a Response,” in which, for the first time, Nancy takes the opportunity to address an often-discussed issue: how and in what way his own thinking is related to the thought of Merleau-Ponty.

Notes

1. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht/Boston: Kluwer, 1982), 93.
2. *S*, 212.
3. EM, 168.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Entretiens avec Georges Charbonnier, et autres dialogues, 1946–1959*, ed. Jérôme Mélançon (Paris: Verdier, 2016).