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Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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'Movement as Disclosive of Being'
Merleau-Ponty: From the Psychology of Gestalt to the Analysis of Movement

At the very beginning, we can extrapolate some notions Merleau-Ponty developed on the analysis of movement. Specifically, in the first phase of his work, movement is conceived as a "structure", and as a "relationship" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 311-315), a concept which will then be taken up and developed during 1953. Merleau-Ponty attempts here to free the phenomenon of movement from any empiricist or idealistic reductionism through the investigation of our perception of space, combined with a theory of motility and of the body as a junction between the sensitive and symbolic word, between organic and cultural, to finally reach the understanding of perception as a form of expression. Starting from the courses of the 1950s at the Collège de France, he focuses on the perception of movement by making a closer comparison with the psychology of perception, especially with the Gestalt studies (see, for istance, Dalmasso 2010; Di Fazio, 2015). He uses the example of movement to show that each phenomenon is the articulation and concretisation of a symbolic system and not the trace of a single separate element. In fact, the simple perception of a movement implies a subject located in the world, therefore it cannot be considered a simple movement of a mobile object in an objective space, nor reduced to a movement experienced within. More precisely, 'movement becomes charged with all the meaning scattered in the sensible world and, in the silent arts, becomes a universal means of expression' (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 4).

Movement must therefore be understood as a Gestalt structure that implies the structure of experience. In this aspect, movement has an ontological dimension as a connection between all dimensions of experience. Moreover these dimensions must be understood in relation to the subject that supports them and in which they are born. The body-movement nexus proves to precede the expression of all cognition. But it is not a one-way relationship, because some pathologies show that the destruction of motor capabilities leaves the symbolic knowledge of spatial forms intact, so we can say that we are conscious as we are mobile and in the same way, we are mobile as we are conscious.

* The first part of this article was written by Damiano Cantone (pages 1–4), while the second part by Luca Taddio (pages 5–9). The general drafting of the text and its theoretical conception must be attributed jointly to both authors.

During the course Maurice Merleau-Ponty held at the Collège de France in 1953 published with the title *Le Monde Sensible et le Monde de l'Expression*, he addressed the issue of movement, passing through a series of experiments drawn mainly from the Psychology of Gestalt. This engagement had a profound impact on his thinking, offering him important suggestions for developing the phenomenological theory of movement he was working on in that same period. The most iconic expression found in the notes of his lectures, the one that expresses the meaning of his attempt to give shape to a new ontology, is ''movement as disclosive of being' [*révélateur de l'être*] (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 100).

In order to understand the above statement we must focus, in particular, on lectures 7 and 8 of the course, in which he addresses the theme of 'apparent movement' beginning from the analysis of 'stroboscopic movement'. Merleau-Ponty's main source in these passages, as his explicit references show, is chapter 7 of Kurt Koffka's *The Principles of Psychology* (Koffka 1935). Some of the authors Merleau-Ponty refers, such as Wertheimer, Duncker, Ternus and Metzger (see Wertheimer 1912; Ternus 1926; Metzger 1954; Dunker 1960), are also drawn from Koffka's work, In this article, however, we would like to focus on his reading of some experiments – and their arguments – in order to show that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological 'method', i.e. the way he worked in close contact with experimental psychology, continues even today to constitute the most current idea of phenomenology.

This idea of phenomenology which does not disregard experiments is fully embodied by authors such as Kanizsa, first and foremost, as well as some of his students, such as Giovanni B. Vicario and Paolo Bozzi (see Bozzi 1969, 2007; Kanizsa 1991; Vicario 2000).[1] Through his work, the latter in particular offers us a more rigorous methodology and epistemological framework for experimental phenomenology. These experiments bring to the fore the problem of the ontological status of 'apparent movement' and, therefore, the issue of the link between movement and reality. Merleau-Ponty identified the key to tackling the above- mentioned problem in the epistemological implications from the analysis of the experiments. Let us examine some of these experiments so as to address the problem with him, and in so doing understand the sense of 'movement as disclosive of being' referred to above.[2] We will limit ourselves to considering

[1] As a matter of fact, through the analysis of Kanizsa's working method (see Kanizsa, 1980), it was Paolo Bozzi who brought to the surface the epistemological framework for a 'science of the observable', which he called 'experimental phenomenology' (see Bozzi, 1989).

[2] The concept of movement as 'disclosive of being' is in line with the idea of 'field' that Merleau-Ponty drew from Gestalt Psychology (borrowed, in turn, from contemporary physics). The perception field is a complex *dynamic system* in which forces are distributed in an autonomous and self-regulating manner. The *dynamic* movement that implies forces, field and equilibrium is also understood in this perspective. Only an idea of movement expressed in these terms is capable of accounting for *encountered* reality.

some of the experiments concerning apparent movement.[3] The central point of this thinking is to grasp the ontological status and very meaning of the concept of 'appearance' with respect to a supposed reality. In our opinion, the chiasma linking these two concepts is reversible. It is a matter of identifying, through Merleau-Ponty's experiments and observations, the theoretical cores that characterise the possibility of defining what constitutes appearance and reality and on what assumptions they are based.

The first case we examine is the classic example of 'stroboscopic movement'. As is well known, this consists in perceiving a movement beginning from switching two precise light stimuli on and off in succession, as in the case, for example, of the movement of lights in a common amusement park. Let us go over the taxonomy of this phenomenon as offered by Vicario: (1) both lights are off; (2) only one light is on; (3) both lights are off; (4) the other light is on; and (5) both lights are off. If the 'isi', that is the interstimulus interval, is less than 10 ms, you see two stationary lights; if it is more than 500 ms, however, you see two lights flashing, alternating between the left and the right. If the interval instead has a value of about 50 ms, you see just one light flashing left to right. You have to bear in mind that an 'isi' interval of between 50 and 100 ms makes our vision of reality possible. Vicario himself points out that what we see slightly lags behind what is happening in the world and, above all, it is from the analysis of this movement that we are able to see that what happens afterwards influences what happens before. This last statement means that we are led or steered to identify a causal relation between lights switching on and off and the movement of light. In other words, in a T1 time, the first light switches on and then off. In a T2 time the second light switches on, and only at this moment do we see the light move. The result is that we perceive the movement when it has already finished 'in reality'. Two unique and independent events turn into a single event called 'apparent movement' (seeing the light move from left to right). This fusion occurs within an ideal time of between 60 and 80 ms (see Vicario, 2005, p. 186).

Apart from the numerous experimental analyses examining this phenomenon, we begin to understand that the quality of the phenomenic aspect (our direct experience of the world) has a degree of independence from the underlying physical world.[4] Based on this conclusion, Merleau-Ponty asserts that 'every movement is stroboscopic' (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 96): in this statement, he captured an analogy between what happens on our retina and what happens within

[3] We would like to underline the very close relationship between Koffka's chapter 7 and Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the experimental part aimed at grasping the ontological sense of movement.

[4] We would like to mention Reichardt's model, which Vicario analysed, and the respective 'laws of Korte' that Zapparoli and Ferradini (1963) examined with reference to stroboscopic movement. On the detailed analysis of the appearance-reality relationship, see Taddio (2011; 2012).

the stroboscopic movement. We can explain this analogy through cinema, linking the cinematic experience and the individual filmic frames: as is well known stroboscopic movement lies at the foundations of our cinematic experience. The point of fusion occurs with a projection of approximately 24 frames per second, a time interval that gives us the illusion of movement. The result – the cinematographic *continuum* – has a degree of reality which is independent of its underlying reality, that is, the film. For example, a scene that produces a feeling of fear in spectators is characterised by a certain event contained in the narration of the film, and – from an ontological point of view – it is only this event which is the 'real' correlate of our feeling. The narrative present is not reducible to an underlying level: in this sense, movement 'discloses' being, that is, a level of reality emerges which has a degree of independence from the physical level that is its condition. Merleau-Ponty wrote:

> Hence real movement, even when different from stroboscopic [movement], is not given as movement on the retina. The screen effect can be reproduced with stroboscopic movement (cinema does it) which would then seem like real movement. This 'reality' is therefore a matter of endogenous organization, and this organization can be studied/[66] (VII2)/in stroboscopic movement where it is clearer. (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 96–97)[5]

It is not, therefore, a matter of identifying an underlying reality, the true reality, with respect to an apparent world: on the contrary, the primary reference system is the reality of this appearance, from which we investigate the underlying physical world. Again in relation to apparent movement, experimental measurements show that the distance at which the lights are located (distal stimulus) does not influence reaction times, but that these times are faster when lights are switched off than when they are switched on. Moreover, the further away the stimuli are positioned, the more the apparent speed of the movement decreases. These variables do not depend on our subjective attitude, rather they are properties of the things and their constituent relations which under certain conditions produce reality effects that we call the 'world', or under other conditions those that we call 'cinema' (see Vicario, 2005, p. 186).

Again in relation to stroboscopic movement, Ternus' experiments aimed at underlining the gestaltic coherence of the structure in the dynamics of the

[5] We quote form the English translation of the forthcoming publication (*The Sensible World and the World of Expression: Course Notes from the Collège De France*, 1953, Northwestern University Press) that the translator, Bryan Smyth, made available to us in advance. In terms of the reference editions and page number, we refer to the sole original French edition (the only one currently on the market). Regarding stroboscopic movement, Merleau-Ponty wrote in the margin of his notes: '[*in margin*] why, in stroboscopic movement, [do] 2 points, in given conditions of succession and distance, form a movement? Or 2 offset rectangles [form] a single one at rest? That must be read in each of the points already, in the very impact of a rectangle on my looking [*regard*]: this impact is not, like that of a point, [the] presence of a figure, but of a background, [not a] localized impact, but [the] scanning of an entire area by my looking' (Merleau-Ponty, 1953, p. 111).

movement are crucially (see, for istance, Leng and He, 1999; Shi, Chen, & Mueller 2010).

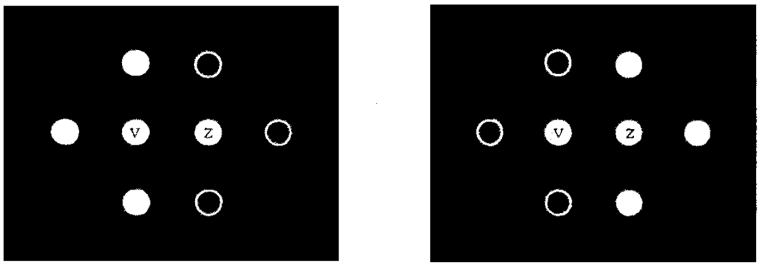

Fig. 1 Ternus experiment. The dots V and Z, although they remain illuminated both in phase 1a and in phase 1b, look like shifting together with the others to the right.

In 1926, Ternus conducted a series of experiments to study the way how stimuli subjected to stroboscopic modifications conserve their unitarity and identity. The experimental apparatus in this case involved the simultaneous display of several points that switched on and off. For example, if the lighting of the five white points of Fig. 1a was followed, after a short interval, by the lighting of the five white points of Fig. 1b, the entire arrangement of five points was seen as moving from left to right, together with the two central points V and Z, even though these were illuminated in both phases. In reality, points V and Z did not undergo any change; nevertheless they were seen to shift. Our perceptive activity prefers to preserve, as far as possible, the unity and identity of the forms.

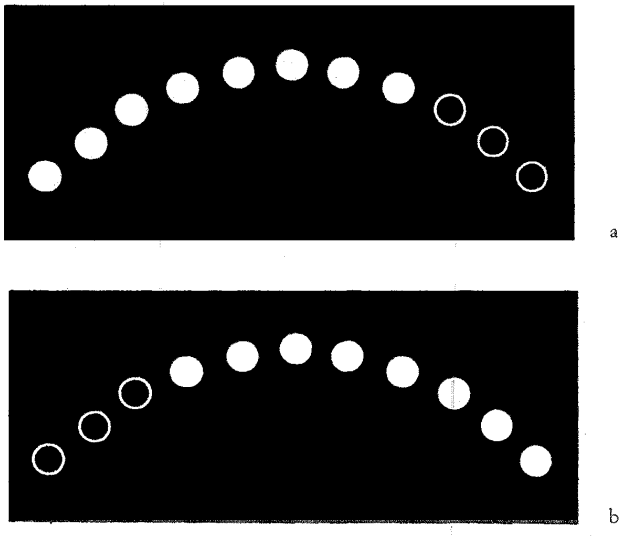

Fig: 2 Ternus experiment. The comparison of the two conditions a and b produces the effect of shifting the dots from left to right.

When the luminous points were arranged as in Fig. 2a for the first display and as in Fig. 2b for the next display, the five central points that were illuminated in both displays should have appeared motionless. In fact only three points on the left should have been seen shifting to the right in accordance with physical occurrence. Instead, the five central points were seen sliding along a curvilinear trajectory until the illuminated point at the top right in Fig. 2a occupied the lower right point in Fig. 2b (Massironi, 1998). These examples help to highlight the fact that perceptual activity tends to preserve as much as possible the stability of an environment characterised by continuous transformation and movement. In fact, Merleau-Ponty wrote:

> Thus 1) The movement of the arc is therefore not the sum of the movements of its parts, it's the whole as such, a non-additive whole, that moves – The movement flows from the whole arc (or cross) as such – The apprehension of the movement is the same kind as that of the figure, [of the] becoming of a figure, and the identification is the same kind as that of a stationary figure with itself: i.e., temporal effect of the separation. In this sense, movement is included in the structure of the figure. (…) but reciprocally 2) the structure of the figure is only constant by means of the movement, only in it – We don't first of all see the same figure and then that it moved: we see it pass from [its] initial to final position, it's recognized through the identity of its/[68] (VII4)/possibilities, the figure is [the] locus or trace of a certain type of movement, of certain dynamic properties. (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 98)

We have used these examples to emphasise the role of appearance in a dynamic of movement, but it is precisely the ontological status of what we designate appearance is problematic. In fact, appearance is always related to – or implies – an underlying reality. Yet, and again from an ontological point of view, the stability of the so-called apparent phenomenon is also part of the elements that lead us to identify reality as such. We stress again the fact that there is a divergence between what from a phenomenological point of view we indicate as 'reality' and what we indicate as 'appearance'. The result of this divergence is phenomenic reality that possesses a degree of autonomy that cannot be reduced to the physical level.

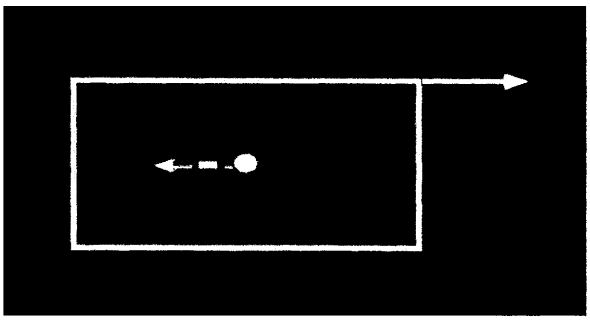

Fig: 3 Induced movement. The black dot in the center looks like shifting to the left when the rectangle shifts to the right.

Let us now examine another instance, the case of the 'induced movement' Dunker analysed in 1929 (Dunker, 1929). It occurs when the movement of one element of the observed scene is attributed to another element. In a complete dark environment only a rectangle and a point inside it are visible, as shown in Fig. 3. When the rectangle is shifted to the right, the point that is actually it is still perceived as sliding to the left, while the rectangle appears motionless. According to Dunker, this occurs because the perceptive activity *separates the systems*: the observed scene is segregated and ordered hierarchically. The perceived movement thus depends on the relation that each object has with the part of the scene taking on the role of reference scheme. Seeing as viewers automatically assume the reference scheme to be more stable than the single elements within it, they always attribute the movement to the single element, even when the reference scheme is moving, unless information is available to establish what actually moves. Regarding this, Merleau-Ponty noted that: 'E.g., Duncker studying induced movement (two figures in the dark with subliminal movement of one of them and no visible figure-background relation = either *a* or *b* alone in movement, – or both, or both at rest' (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 102). The philosopher's analysis not only stressed the importance of induced movement for a theory of perception, it also shed light on the fact that:

> This would leave aside what's most valuable in the phenomenal description of Gestalt [theory], for it is certainly true that all our perception gives us the impression of coming from the object, that movement in particular appears to us each time as coming from the appearance itself, that even if personal-historical factors are involved, they are only given to us as sedimented in the perceptual landscape, that therefore we don't have the elements of the perceptual calculus, but only the results, and that ultimately perception is not in this sense a mental [*spirituel*] act, the organization is not [a] *Sinngebung* by us as [a] thinking subject but as [an] incarnate total being/ [72] (VII8)/endowed with a certain past. (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 104).

The field setup takes part in the genesis of the movement. Merleau-Ponty found support for his insight in Michotte's (1954) experiments on the perception of causality, analysing in particular the 'launching effect'.

This effect is consistent with the perceptive phenomenon that leads viewers to consider the movement of body A as the cause of the movement of body B which is 'launched by A'. If we place two rectangles – A and B, one black and one red – on a grey screen at a distance of 4 centimetres from each other, the black rectangle moves towards B, travelling through space at a speed of 30 cm per sec. stops when it makes contact with the red rectangle. An observer facing the screen would see that the black rectangle has moved to the right and touched the red one. Let us examine another aspect: beginning from the final position, the two rectangles standing side by side, let us now assume that B suddenly moves away from A,

shifting to the right at a speed of 10 cm per sec, and stops at few centimetres away. The event could be described as rectangle B moving away from A towards the right. If the second event takes place immediately after A stops, we could describe the event as follows: A moves, reaches B and touches it, and B immediately moves away from A, stopping at a short distance away. A possible observer will not describe the situation this way, however; he or she will provide a single description condensed into a causal relationship: the black square hits the red square and in so doing pushes it away. This happens even though we know very well that there is no physical relationship between the two observable parts of the experiment. We can affirm that the apparent pushing movement is determined by properties of apparent reality that are not detectable in either the distal stimulus or the physical properties as observed individually.

In the same 1953 course, Merleau-Ponty equates movement to expression: 'mouvement = expression. [...] D'où capacité expressive indéfinie du mouvement. Expression définie ici comme apparition d'une existence' (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, pp. 183, 173).

Defining expression, and therefore movement, as the property of an existence is interpreted from the sense of appearance as the property of reality. In Michotte's experiment described just above, causality is configured at the beginning from the expressive properties intrinsic to the phenomenon (the property of impulse, push, etc.) which Merleau-Ponty referenced in ontological terms. In this sense, he argues that movement and its appearance have their own ontological value: and it for this reason that movement is 'revealing of being'. For Merleau-Ponty, this means that being is disclosed and revealed through expression or, in other words – referencing the points made in the psychology of James J. Gibson (1979) with respect to the concept of affordances or tertiary (expressive) qualities – we could say that tertiary qualities are on the same level as primary and secondary qualities. Appearance, along with expressiveness, has its own ontological status. Movement is a property of being that manifests through expression. Expression is not divisible from movement, but serves to reveal existence of movement. The level of phenomenal reality that Merleau-Ponty examined by analysing and referencing several experiments proves to be a true 'experimental phenomenology'. It is a method that encompasses all of its topicality and methodological fertility: the experiment is the site par excellence on which to focus the critical capacity of philosophy. The act of examining different experiments sheds light on ontological aspects of reality. Phenomenology, understood in these terms, is entrusted with acting philosophically within scientific knowledge in order to draw the theoretical potential they contain from experiments. The dynamic-expressive aspects presented here induced Merleau-Ponty to formulate a 'new ontology', but unfortunately he did not have the time to complete it. However, his *Course* clearly shows

not only the spirit and methodology but also the project the way Merleau-Ponty's analysis went beyond the experiment itself:

> Easy as it is to explain according to its conditions, for example, such and such an apparent movement of a spot of light in a field that has been artificially simplified and reduced by the experimental apparatus, a total determination of the concrete perceptual field of a given living individual at a given moment appears not provisionally unattainable but definitively meaningless, *because it presents structures that do not even have a name in the* objective *universe of separated and separable 'conditions'*. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 21)

He sought to show through the analysis of experiments that laying bare the conditions of the phenomenon in its objectivity neither captures nor exhausts the phenomenon itself, as it is in its immediacy. The kind of immediate experience addressed by the phenomenology of perception thus maintains its independence and he examined this experience from an ontological point of view in the last phase of his thinking. His is an ontology that succeeds in overcoming the classical dichotomies between appearance and reality by virtue of 'movement as disclosive of being'.

Summary
In this essay we seek to clarify the meaning and theoretical implications of the statement by Merleau-Ponty contained in his 1953 course, *Le Monde Sensible et le Monde de l'Expression,* according to which movement is 'revealing of being'. This analysis takes up and comments on chapter 7 of *Koffka's Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (dedicated to the issue of movement) and related experiments in particular. We will show that Merleau-Ponty's idea of ontology of movement emerges from his examination of several exemplary cases. This method of analysis brings to light an idea of similar phenomenology compatible with an experimental phenomenology.
Keywords: Phenomenology, perception, movement, Merleau-Ponty, ontology.

'Bewegung als Enthüllen vom Sein' Merleau-Ponty: Von der Psychologie der Gestalt zur Analyse der Bewegung

Zusammenfassung
In diesem Aufsatz versuchen wir, die Bedeutung und theoretischen Implikationen der Aussage von Merleau-Ponty zu klären, die in seinem Kurs von 1953, *Le Monde Sensible und Le Monde de l'Expression*, enthalten ist, wonach Bewegung 'das Sein offenbart'. Diese Analyse greift Kapitel 7 von Koffkas *Prinzipien der Gestaltpsychologie* (dem Thema Bewegung gewidmet) und verwandte Experimente auf. Wir werden zeigen, dass Merleau-Pontys Idee der Ontologie der Bewegung aus seiner Untersuchung mehrerer beispielhafter Fälle hervorgeht. Diese Forschungsmethode bringt eine Idee einer Art Phänomenologie ans Licht, die mit einer experimentellen Phänomenologie vereinbar ist.
Schlüsselwörter: Phänomenologie, Wahrnehmung, Bewegung, Merleau-Ponty, Ontologie.

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