

## **DERRIDA'S READING OF MERLEAU-PONTY: TO PRESERVE THE OTHER FROM A VIOLENT GESTURE OF REAPPROPRIATION**

### **A LEITURA DERRIDIANA DE MERLEAU-PONTY: PARA PRESERVAR O OUTRO DE UM GESTO VIOLENTO DE REAPROPRIAÇÃO**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on the relation between Derrida and Merleau-Ponty; in particular, it addresses the role played by “the other” in the constitution of the Self. I reconstruct this relation starting from the critique that Derrida moves to Merleau-Ponty in *Le Toucher*, which contains Derrida's last comparing with phenomenology. Furthermore, the text of Derrida deals with the touch, touching and contact, but also with the touch of the other, following the ambiguity of the French “*le toucher*”. Haptic experience, as the visual, constitutes the place where Derrida performs the comparison with the Merleau-Pontian treatment of the other. I argue that, by developing the idea of the flesh (*la chair*), Merleau-Ponty removes the singularity of every single living subject, and I will show that he does it by implementing two gestures. On one hand, he erases the distance in self-contact claiming that the body feels himself without external medium. The subject would be immediate and pure presence of himself, not only in psychic and conscious life, but also in pre-reflexive experience. On the other hand, he compares the self-experience with the experience of the other living and corporeal subject; thus the distinction between the other and me would fall and the other would become just part of me. This is, according to Derrida, a violent gesture of reappropriation of the other; a gesture that fails from the beginning, because it is only oriented by a desire of pure presence. According to Derrida, it is possible to think another history of self and other that subtracts them to the desire of presence to which they are submitted. Actually, the other is always at work, already in the self-experience. I finally show that alterity is the transcendental condition of the experience.

**KEYWORDS:** Phenomenology; deconstruction; living body; chair; self-hetero-affection; the experience of the other in Merleau-Ponty

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## RESUMO

Este artigo centra-se na relação entre Derrida e Merleau-Ponty, em particular, naquela que aborda o papel desempenhado pelo "outro" na constituição do *Self*. Eu reconstruí essa relação a partir da crítica que Derrida faz a Merleau-Ponty em *Le Toucher*, a partir da qual comparo o último Derrida com a fenomenologia. Além disso, o texto de Derrida lida com o toque, a ação de tocar e estabelecer contato, mas também com o toque do outro, seguindo a ambigüidade do francês "*le toucher*". Experiência tátil, como a visual, constitui o local no qual Derrida executa a comparação com o tratamento merleau-pontiano do outro. Defendo que, ao desenvolver a idéia de carne humana (*la chair*), Merleau-Ponty remove a singularidade de cada sujeito vivo, e eu vou mostrar que ele faz isso através da implementação de dois gestos. Por um lado, ele apaga a distância através do *self-contact* (tocar-se a si mesmo) pretendendo que o corpo sinta-se a si mesmo sem precisar do meio externo. O sujeito seria a presença imediata e pura de si mesmo, não só na vida psíquica e consciente, mas também na experiência pré-reflexiva. Por outro lado, ele compara a auto-experiência com a experiência do outro enquanto sujeito vivo e corpóreo, assim, a distinção entre o outro e o eu cairia e o outro se tornaria apenas uma parte de mim. Este é, de acordo com Derrida, um gesto violento de reapropriação do outro; um gesto que falha desde o início, porque é apenas orientado por um desejo de pura presença. De acordo com Derrida, é possível pensar uma outra história do eu e do outro que lhes subtrai o desejo de presença a que são submetidos. Na verdade, o outro é sempre no trabalho, já na auto-experiência. Eu finalmente mostro que a alteridade é a condição transcendental da experiência.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Fenomenologia; desconstrução; corpo vivido; carne; auto-afetação hetero; a experiência do outro em Merleau-Ponty

## 1. Introduction

Merleau-Ponty extends the presentational field until reappropriating the alterity of the other. In this way, he does not consider the necessary analogical appresentation, thus not immediate, that is part of the experience of the *alter ego* described by Husserl in *Ideas II* or in *Cartesian Meditations*. The difference between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty about the relation with others is that, for the latter, it is possible an immediate and purely present experience, i.e. a full intuition.

It happens because Merleau-Ponty opposes his phenomenology to that of Husserl, which is, for him, representational and too intellectualistic. For this reason, the French

phenomenologist theorizes a chiasmic relation among living and corporeal subjects, assuming a closer proximity than Husserl has ever argued. Since from the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty claims that the sensation is a communion between the body and the world; furthermore, each sensation would be the direct consequence of the primordial contact with the Being, i.e. the perfect coexistence of perceiving and perceived or sensing and sensible. By virtue of the corporeal and carnal communion, the living body touches itself and other living bodies, achieving a reflexive relation of co-perception. However, any co-perception would be impossible without the common ground of flesh (*chair*), which is the field of originary presentation. It provides the reflexivity of sensibility, in particular the senses of touch and vision; the latter, in fact, “envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p.133).

The intuitive fulfillment of touching and seeing can be explained as the attempt to erase the appresentational and re-presentational perception, in favor of the worldly self-affection, pure presence of others, without remains. Merleau-Ponty is extending indefinitely the immediate self-reversibility of the flesh.

A corporeal reflexivity would provide the immediate access to other subjects; for this reason, again in *Signs*, he argues that the corporeity in general is “transitivity and confusion of self and other” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964, p.174). The experience that functions as example of pure and full presentation of the other is the reversible contact between different bodies that happens in the handshake. It is the mutual intertwining, which shows the total fusion in the common carnal Being.

According to Merleau-Ponty the other can be perceived in perceptual evidence, rather than through analogy or introjections, as Husserl states in the second volume of Husserl's *Ideas*. As mentioned above, the experience of the other that Merleau-Ponty takes as example is the handshake, because it offers to the subject immediate and full evidence of the other. The same experience happens to the subject, if he touches the hand of another body or if he have self-contact between his own hands.

The presumption that works behind this analogy consists in the metaphorisation of the hand of one living body with the hand of another one, which replaces one of the two hands pertaining to the same body. Starting from this mutual exchange between different living bodies, Merleau-Ponty establishes the foundations for the reversibility of the body

and, later, for the chiasmatic and fusional notion of the flesh (*chair*), which is the substance which constitutes every body (living and not). The flesh makes possible the perception of the other that becomes extension of my body. For this reasons, the handshake offers the same originary co-presence that exists between hands of the same body and Merleau-Ponty claims that the living body and others are like organs of a unique intercorporeity. In my opinion, the equivalence established here by Merleau-Ponty is grounded in the misunderstanding of the husserlian notion of living body (*Leib*). In fact, Husserl has never intended that everything in the world or the entire world could be considered as living body. The latter is only the body of the perceiving subject, oriented into the world by means of his corporeal body. Instead, Merleau-Ponty translates *Leib* with *chair*, producing the extension of the living field until encompass all the material bodies in the world and the world itself. The Merleau-Pontian perspective leads to a world made of flesh, then to the flesh of the world – *chair du monde* (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p.84). The theorization of the ‘flesh of the world’ is part of a translation that brings from phenomenology to the ontology of flesh, which marks *The Visible and the Invisible*. Therefore, according to Derrida, the notion of flesh runs the risk of erasing the distances that divides parts of the same body and different bodies. The result of the world that becomes entirely flesh is the vivification and spiritualization of the other, intended as other bodies in general; in fact, Merleau-Ponty does not refer this gesture only to the living bodies. The paths of Merleau-Ponty leads to a world that is from the beginning intersubjective field, thus it is not necessary any intellectual instance or analogical re-presentation to perceive the alterity. All living bodies recognize themselves immediately, before thinking, because they all belong to the same world, where they act and discover a certain familiarity of action. They are *recto* and *verso* of the same phenomenon and no gap remains between them, rather, according to Merleau-Ponty, they “born together in original ecstasy” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1964, p.174). For this reason, the notion of flesh produces a world where others become flesh of the living subject and vice versa; they all are related from the beginning to the flesh of world.

The self-affection of the individual living body turns into a self-affected world, which flexes upon itself because it is made by flesh. According to Merleau-Ponty, the same stuff (*étoffe*) makes *ego* and *alter ego*.

In my opinion, Merleau-Ponty attempts to free others living subject from the domain of objectivity, but he finally falls in the opposite result by reducing the differences between living *ego* and *alter ego*, rather including *alter* in the *ego*. The living body of the ego relates itself to others bodies as if they would be just extension of its own body. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty argues that the living body are part of the world as the world is part of the living body and writes that "I am authorized to say that I am the world" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1968, p.81).

By means of the flesh of the world and the reversibility of the haptic and visual perceptions, the alterity of the other disappears in the undifferentiated and all-encompassing totality of flesh. In this article, following Derrida, I suggest that the experience of the other described by Merleau-Ponty shows a violent gesture of reappropriation, which animates the relation with other than itself, regardless of whether it is another subjective living body or an unanimated thing in the world.

In *On Touching*, Derrida moves to show the risks that are in Merleau-Ponty's texts and to avoid them by thinking another kind of relation with others. In fact, he aims to restore the singularity of each living being, which cannot be object for the work of mourning. The latter is impossible or endless and the other subject remains at distance. It is always a lack of presence, which preserves the otherness from any subjective metabolism.

## 2. Derrida and the self-hetero-affection

Derrida states in *On Touching* that the other as other living body (*Aussenleiblichkeit*) is a non reappropriable instance for the *ego*, even if the latter is intended as the corporeal subjectivity operative in a pre-categorical field. It happens also before the constitution of the ego as pure transcendental conscience. In fact, the violent gesture that orients the Merleau-Pontian intuitionism of the other incorporates the other not only in terms of immanent life of a psychic subject, but also and primarily in terms of perception. Derrida would demonstrate that the experience of the other in immediate presence leads to the removal of its alterity; for this reason he focuses on the haptic and visual experience, which

establish the equivalence between the self-contact of the living body (*Leib*) and the contact with other living bodies (*Aussenleibes*).

Derrida claims that the pure reversibility, which works in haptic experience described by Merleau-Ponty, does not work at all. In fact, it presupposes, as transcendental condition of every substitution between others and the self, a “substitution of nonsubstitutables” (DERRIDA, 2005, p.192).

Instead, the gesture of Merleau-Ponty consists in the denial of this condition, whereas the thesis of Derrida is that the spatial difference among living bodies is the condition of possibility of the experience. Derrida states that the otherness of the other resists to reappropriation by the self, only maintaining the distance that separates them. In fact, the latter makes possible the relation with others, but also the self-relation. According to Derrida, it is an interruption in reversibility in both cases of vision and touch, a lack of intuitive fulfillment, which allows the perception of the other. The flesh meets a certain resistance by material world, because, without this exteriority, it would not be a double apprehension in self-touching and, consequently, it would be impossible to distinguish the living body from any material corporeality.

“For that – writes Derrida –, it is necessary that the space of the material thing – like a difference, like the heterogeneity of a spacing – slip between the touching and the touched, since the two neither must nor can coincide if indeed there is to be a double apprehension” (DERRIDA, 2005, p.175). Therefore Derrida states that the other brings an interruption into the self-experience, as tactile as visual, of the living body.

Contrary to what Merleau-Ponty does, Derrida aims to demonstrate that a gap, a difference, or better a *différance* works in the experience of the other and that the spatial difference among the bodies is the condition of possibility of the experience. According to Derrida, “without this unbridgeable abyss, there would be no handshake, nor blow or caress, nor, in general, any experience of the other’s body as such” (DERRIDA, 2005, p.191). He resumes the prudence of Husserl, who has placed the *Einfühlung* among living bodies for preserving the irreducible alterity of the other.

He moves in respect of a certain exteriority that affects the relation between the self and the other, inside and outside, psyche and extension. Also in self-experience, the subject can refer to himself just by means of an external and material medium; he differs from

himself, because he relates to himself as other, for example as himself in another temporal instant.

Therefore the body of the other works as the medium that interrupts the self-contact. The same body is affected from outside. For this reason, it cannot claim that the living body constitutes itself by means of pure self-affection; rather the self-constitution presupposes the exposition to the other, as world or as other living body. It is necessary that the proper is composed in experience with the non-proper.

On one hand, Merleau-Ponty shows a coincidence between different living bodies in touch. This interweaving (*entrelacs*) holds together perceiving (self) and perceived (other) and combines them into an undifferentiated totality.

On the other hand, Derrida states that the relation concerns separated terms, which can be related only by means of this spacing (*espacement*). He emphasizes the division (*partage*), the spacing (*espacement*) as syncope that “separates and interrupts at the heart of contact” (DERRIDA, 2005, p.195). The heart is the place of absolute intimacy, the “untouchable self-interiority [...]. And yet nothing appears at least to be more auto-affective than the heart” (DERRIDA, 2005, p.267).

Contrary to Merleau-Ponty, Derrida claims that the *partage* without fusion works in the contact: a being-with without confusion of singularities. In fact, the contact does not produce identification but dissemination or spacing of sense; even the experience of haptic reflexivity cannot be separated from the exteriority, which remains irreducible, hosting the other and the outside.

The other is already at work in the presumptive immediacy of the perception; it strikes at the pure intuition. Therefore, the heart can feel itself through the skin as surface of the living body and the flesh (*das Fleish*, in the sense that Husserl points out in *Ideas II*) as part of the body and *medium* of self-contact.

In this sense, Derrida recalls Husserl against Merleau-Ponty. In fact, Husserl has always claimed that the subject can be just the appresentation of the other, i.e. a secondary and derivative presence, because the other can be made only by an “apperceptive transfer” (HUSSERL, 1960, 110). It has only presentification of a similarity and not pure evidence.

If, on one side, Merleau-Ponty extends the haptical reversibility to the relationship between different living bodies, reappropriating of the other by means of a violent gesture.

He aims to ensure a field of pure self-affection. On the other, Derrida reiterates the irreducibility of living singularities and traces a path that leads away from the absolute coincidence of intuition that works in the texts of Merleau-Ponty.

It happens because the necessary contamination with the other declares the impossibility of gaining a pure intuitive fulfillment. Rather this contamination shows the existence of a similarity between the intersubjective and intrasubjective contact, which is performed by *différance* and which is not intertwining (in the sense of *entrelacs*, with which Merleau-Ponty translates the husserlian *Verflechtung*) of one to another.

In this regard, the necessary contamination (*Verflechtung*) between world or others and living body, as intended by Husserl, must be rethought, but not in the sense of the *entrelacs*, as described by Merleau-Ponty, because the latter notion leads to the total confusion between elements involved in the same flesh.

According to Derrida, the living body, which becomes flesh in the latest texts of Merleau-Ponty, reveals the desire of immediate presence that haunted the phenomenological tradition; so the alterity of the other is removed from the experience. The idea of pure self-affection orients those theories occupied in the experiencing living body, removing the constitutive crossing of the other as other in the self. Merleau-Ponty statements are grounded on the intuitionism warranted by immediate evidence. Instead, Derrida argues that the interruption in contact is the only and necessary condition to perceive, therefore to have self-contact and contact with other.

In haptic perception, where Merleau-Ponty presume the total reflexivity of sensing, there has always been impossible coincidence between perceived and perceiving. Therefore, as irruption of the non-I in the reversibility of perceiving, the alterity becomes necessary for the subject to recognize himself; but, at the same time, it corrupts the self-perceiving experience.

For this reason, Derrida argues that it is possible only the self-hetero-affection of a subjectivity, who needs the *detour* through alterity. Thus, the other then returns strongly into the aesthetic discourse and the subject or the living body became thinkable only when they touch the resistance of the other, which is intended both as other subject or material body (*Körper*). They remain impenetrable object for the impossible reappropriation. Therefore, the appropriation fails tout court. Then, to summarize, Derrida considers the



supplement that revokes the distinction between other and self. In fact, the supplement is the absolute alterity, which, before being *alter ego*, is already the other body.

In addition, the other is also the animal that look at the subject and calls him to respond. This passivity differs from the passive synthesis described by Husserl in his late texts and renewals by Merleau-Ponty. This is a passivity as weak force, as a call coming from the other. The exposition of the subject allows the call from the outside, exposition of bodies, which are spaced by means of skin and flash.

As Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology*:

the possibility of auto-affection manifests itself as such: it leaves a trace of itself in the world. The worldly residence of a signifier becomes impregnable. That which is written remains, and the experience of touching-touched admits the world as a third party. The exteriority of space is irreducible there. Within the general structure of auto-affection, within the giving-oneself-a-presence or a pleasure, the operation of touching-touched receives the other within the narrow gulf that separates doing from suffering. And the outside, the exposed surface of the body, signifies and marks forever the division that shapes auto-affection. Auto-affection is a universal structure of experience. All living things are capable of autoaffection. And only a being capable of symbolizing, that is to say of auto-affecting, may let itself be affected by the other in general. Auto-affection is the condition of an experience in general. This possibility —another name for 'life' (DERRIDA, 1997, p.165).

The subject does not constitute himself through confusion or co-naissance, but only by *différance* among different surfaces.

For this purpose, Nancy coins the neologism taken up by Derrida in *On Touching: expeausition*, which is capable of linking together the exposition of the body to the outside and the skin (*peau*) as limit of this exposition<sup>1</sup>. The subject is exposed to the other by means of corporeal surfaces. According to Derrida the body is not pure concentration without ruptures, rather it is hetero-affected and spaced before the self-constitution. This means that the individual parts and senses of the body are in a relationship of *différance*, which constitutes the same “as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other. [...] each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same” (DERRIDA, 1982, p.17).

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<sup>1</sup> See the paragraph of Nancy's *Corpus* titled “Expeausition”.

Moreover, it has no chance to calculate the coming of the other, also of the death that is the incalculable *par excellence*. Therefore the skin is the surface that allows the body to get in touch with its surroundings, also with what is able to kill it, for example an excess of touch. Thus, the living body is exposed to the unpredictable coming of the other, which allows the survival and, at the same time, can give death to the living body.

Consequently, also the self-touching is affected by the exposition to the outside and it is ‘*haunted*, but *constitutively* haunted, by some hetero-affection’ (DERRIDA, 2005, p.179).

The outside and the other displace the pure coincidence and make possible effects of interiority, i.e. the constitution of a psychic subjectivity.

Likewise, the constitution of the living body is possible through a self-hetero-affection, which requires other bodies according to what Nancy calls ‘*technē* of bodies’ (NANCY, 2008, p.87). The genesis of the living bodies presupposes the distance from which they can spacing themselves. The body is exposition to outside, so there is no pure sensation or self-affection of a subject that would remain closed in himself without ever leaving his interiority. The sense and psyche are thinkable only when the intelligible inextension is deconstructed.

In this context, the other for Derrida is what contaminates the pure self-affection and makes possible any return to the self; thus the self-hetero-affection is the universal structure of experience and, accordingly, it makes possible the life of the living in general.

If there were confusion, then the substitution would not have any sense; in fact, without limits between self and other, it would remain nothing than the self, a wide and unique self.

According to Derrida, it is possible only a relation between nonsubstitutables, which are always separated from each other, absolutely other, *autre*, or better, *tout autre*.

As Derrida states in *The Gift of Death*: “each other (*tout autre*) is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originally nonpresent to my *ego* (as Husserl would say of the *alter ego* that can never be originally present to my consciousness and that I can apprehend only through what he calls *appresentation* and analogy)” (DERRIDA, 1995, p.78).

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