

# The Potential of Passivity Beyond the Intentional Model: Consciousness as Disarticulation in Merleau-Ponty's *Institution and Passivity*

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## ABSTRACT

This article reconfigures Merleau-Ponty's "Problem of Passivity" into the potential of passivity. It contributes to Claude Lefort's strong claims that Merleau-Ponty's *Passivity* course from 1954-1955 published in the volume of course notes *Institution and Passivity* (2010) provides an «attack against the root of modern ontology», and that the phenomenon of passivity has largely been «neglected by most philosophers». Reflected in these assertions is a 21st century perspective on Merleau-Ponty's work, with relevance to current performative, corporeal and political re-workings of phenomenology. The article's aim is to chart how Merleau-Ponty's work on passivity, sleep and the unconscious represents a powerful critique of the Husserlian intentional model and the phenomenological concept of constitution, at the same time as opening potential for viewing consciousness as plural, culturally situated and diffracted.

## Premises

This article reconfigures Merleau-Ponty's "Problem of Passivity" into the potential of passivity. It expands Claude Lefort's claims from his Foreword to *Institution and Passivity* (2010) that Merleau-Ponty's *Passivity* course from 1954-1955 provides an «attack against the root of modern ontology», and that the phenomenon of passivity has largely been «neglected by most philosophers». <sup>1</sup> Reflected

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<sup>1</sup> Lefort (2010) *Foreword to: Merleau-Ponty (2010) Institution and Passivity. Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954-1955)*. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press. xix-xx.

in these assertions is a 21st century perspective on Merleau-Ponty's work, with relevance to current performative, corporeal and political reworkings of phenomenology. Lefort interprets Merleau-Ponty's thought on passivity in terms of modalities, fields and orientations,<sup>2</sup> thereby providing an opening towards dynamic contemporary accounts of phenomenology capable of revealing complex corporeal relations and of contributing to their transformation.

The article charts how Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes on passivity, sleep and the unconscious contain a significant critique of the Husserlian intentional model and the phenomenological concept of constitution, at the same time as opening potential for viewing consciousness as plural, culturally situated and diffracted. The first part of this article considers the *not-quite-sleep* states of somatic practices. It builds on Merleau-Ponty's questioning the potential for passivity as an indeterminate ontology. This part operates according to the dynamic of lateral insertion, focusing on an insertion in Merleau-Ponty's text where he asks whether we are still dealing with corporeality or have somehow gone beyond it, and supporting the argument by inserting phenomenological reflections from meditative somatic practices.

The second part reflects on *sleep and the unconscious*. Sleep, in its unavoidable link with dreaming, is a case that illuminates the peculiar way in which Merleau-Ponty thinks about the passivity of consciousness in its relation to institution. We focus on three main aspects, namely the critique towards the Husserlian notion of constitution, the rethinking of the Freudian notion of interest in the external world, and the critical reflection on the notion of sense as identity. Our aim is to show how the passivity of sleep and the unconscious is sedimented. The mechanism of *Sinngebung*—active constitution—is disarticulated when Merleau-Ponty posits that perception is resumption rather than constitution.

The third part is diffractive, akin to the dizziness of *waking*. It develops the argument in the previous section that awakening is not birth but is re-birth, and circles back to Lefort's claim that passivity is not a state but is «a modality of our relation with the world».<sup>3</sup> We propose the modes of disarticulation and diffraction as ways of deepening our understanding the de-differentiation of passivity. These alternate modalities of relating with the world are supported by looking towards literature, STS (Science and Technology Studies) and research into systemic racial histories of sleep. What began as finding a way to address

<sup>2</sup> Ivi, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> Ivi, p. xx.

the neglect of passivity in philosophy finally comes to ground in the imbalanced politics of sleep and rest. This radical ontology of passivity offers insight into the systemic inequities of race and gender, revealing how passivity institutes and produces institutions as well as opening the potential for disarticulating existing systemic practices and instituting different ones.

The article is co-authored, a performative decision that is consistent with the desire to address relational and indeterminate consciousnesses. Readers will notice that it is composed of two distinct philosophical voices and that the pronouns keep shifting. We work with both de-differentiation and differentiation, at times “we” and “us,” but at times the discussion will be attributed to one author or the other. Different stylistic modes work towards a shared common goal: that of demonstrating the considerable power for Merleau-Ponty’s thought for approaching contemporary crises of embodiment, and demonstrating the potential for passivity as a radical ontology.

#### Not-quite-sleep: The Lateral Passivity of Somatic Practices

In the first part of this paper we consider somatic practices as a conduit towards an indeterminate consciousness that is not-quite-sleep. With the intent to emphasise the potential for passive constitution by means of a set of practices: (i) we lend our argument the quality of an insertion by locating it at a point of insertion in Merleau-Ponty’s lecture notes on “Philosophy and the Phenomenon of Passivity”; (ii) we reveal that the state of not-quite-sleep can be accessed by means of somatic practices thereby opening a methodological dimension to lateral passivity; (iii) we then deepen the account of lateral passivity, arguing that it leaves a residue. This section relies on phenomenological description to demonstrate that somatic practices can be learnt and refined; they can become processes for corporeal institution.

(i)

The final paragraphs of Merleau-Ponty’s lecture notes for “The Problem of Passivity” disintegrate into a series of questions and tentative assertions that merit a close reading from which a consideration of somatic states can rebound. He opens a question of transformation in relation to the absolute, asking if a subject can surpass its own body and history while appearing to itself as absolute. This surpassing is not an exception, for the «subject is absolute in the sense that it can always interrupt». Further, he poses the question of whether this can be achieved by «doing something», something other than refusing to refuse? This

doing is characterised by the «pressure of transformation».<sup>4</sup> The affective qualities of pressure and desire, in combination with an opening towards others and things, is striking as his lecture notes draw to a close that is anything but conclusive. The final paragraphs of the notes appear in smaller font: they are an insertion with the heading “Problem of a phenomenological ontology.” From note 46, we learn that these words are an insertion given the number [125] by the Bibliothèque Nationale (pp. 236-237), with the rationale that «it is likely that Merleau-Ponty composed this note separately and then inserted it after his numbered page (15) of notes for his course lectures» because the note echoes the question with which he ended the section on phenomenological ontology: «Is sleep and wakefulness, sleeping and wakeful consciousness, absence from the world and immediate presence to the world? Which is to say, consciousness of an absence and consciousness of a presence?».<sup>5</sup> The notes to follow this question imply that such a clear distinction cannot hold.

(ii)

It is precisely here that we desire to insert, in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s insertion, a bridge of somatic practices between the states of wakefulness and sleep. His reflections waver, they shimmer, as they point towards an understanding of the body as indistinct and replete with potential. This is a body that “does” and that seeks to enact transformation in relation to other beings and objects in the world. Witness the trajectory of his thought towards a framing of the «sleep of consciousness» that occupies a middle ground between an absence of consciousness and a mode of wakeful consciousness.

Are sleep and wakefulness absence of the world, immediate presence to the world? Is awakening birth? It is rebirth—The preservation of content—It cannot be “corporeal.” Is it ideal? But what does this mean in the absence of idealizing consciousness? Thus, there is preservation of potentialities, habitus. Analogy with the problem of the body: the body becomes an indistinct being, and yet it can reconstitute itself. It is even the body that reawakens us. In a certain way, it stays awake (open sensory field—invasion and resuscitation of consciousness by stimuli).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 131.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, pp. 131-132.

When considering the experience of not-quite-sleep it is not a contradiction to posit that bodily states can be both corporeal and indistinct. Phenomenological accounts of sense perception and alterations to bodily schema arising from a range of somatic practices support the argument that the state of indeterminate consciousness is corporeal, that it is rife with potentiality, and that it is in a perpetual process of de-constitution and reconstitution. It is «noncoincidence with self without pure negation, without a non-possession of self».<sup>7</sup> Passivity is not just a state of potential beyond corporeality. It has the indeterminate qualities of being *inserted* between wakeful consciousness and sleep. Merleau-Ponty urges us to «examine these phenomena, the field structure, the nature of sense as divergence or non-identity, truth as *alethia*, which does not prevent error».<sup>8</sup> A phenomenological awareness of somatic practices does just this. These practices include a range of formalised therapeutic schools such as Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, Rosen Method alongside popular meditation techniques like mindfulness for dealing with stress or supporting healthy sleep. They also include the more specialised ideokinetic techniques practised by many dancers, choreographers and theatre improvisers.<sup>9</sup> Practising the *Full Drop into the Body* technique developed by choreographer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir, I experienced an open sensory field, being neither fully awake nor asleep.

Lying on the floor, beginning by directing my conscious awareness to the task of «melting my bones to a consistency of soft butter»,<sup>10</sup> I drifted out of the sequential logic of progressing bone by bone. My conscious thoughts drifted

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Originating in the 1930s but still practiced currently, ideokinesis refers to the use of mental or imaginative images to guide movement or awareness. A visual or textural image is held in the mind in order to achieve a transformation in movement quality or as part of a rehabilitation program after an injury. See a classic text first published in 1937 by Elsworth Todd, (2008) *The Thinking Body: A study of the Balancing Forces of Dynamic Man*, Gouldsboro (ME): The Gestalt Journal Press, and a contemporary therapeutic account by Bateson, G. (2004) *Motor Imagery for Stroke Rehabilitation: Current Research as a guide to Clinical Practice. Alternative & Complementary Therapies*, 10 (2004) 2. 1-6.

<sup>10</sup> This is Guðjónsdóttir's instruction. For a discussion that grounds Guðjónsdóttir's work in phenomenological practice see: Kozel, S. (2020) *Performing Phenomenology: The Work of Choreographer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir*. In: *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*. Eds. Lucilla Guidi and Thomas Rentsch. 196-213. Leiden: Brill.

and faded as my attention to the matter of my bones transformed my somatic state. What began as consciously directed attention to the bones transformed into attention directing itself and following a corporeal logic that my consciousness could neither fully direct nor fully witness. After some time, I felt a pool of black oil releasing from the left side of my ribcage, under my left arm, outwards onto the floor. With a flicker to an external viewpoint, I suddenly had a mental image of the shape of the pool of oil as if from above my body: it was not too large, just about the width of my own torso and it had uneven edges. I apprehended that it had a dark, liquid sheen. I knew that it was mine. Rippling back to inner sensing, I felt its warmth, and a trace of shame as if I had peed on the floor. This was a shimmer of conscious judgement that something was indeed happening beyond my control, but it disappeared just as quickly as it arrived. With a paradoxical movement of active effort to preserve my passive awareness, I let my somatic state deepen, trying not to analyse it too much for to attend to this phenomena with too much focus would be to kill it. (Kozel, August 2019)

The somatic states that are both revealed and produced by indistinct consciousness do not descend by magic or accident, they are achieved by means of guidance and practice. Instructions to shift the direction and quality of attention can be delicately crafted to support a shift in corporeal awareness. It is entirely possible to suspend the flow of thought, to both withdraw inwards and expand beyond the borders of the body, interrupting the flow of wakeful consciousness and redirecting it without descending fully into sleep. These are somatic *practices*, they are something we *do* or *perform*. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the importance of practice, «the power not to do is all talk as long as it is not translated [128] [16] into action» and he recognises the indirect quality of the work, «to be translated into action, it must not be refusal of the refusal, not negation transformed immediately into relation, not play, but labor». <sup>11</sup> As refusal that is performed, somatic practices move beyond the stasis of “refusal of the refusal” and become an active refusal, or a passive constitution. A refusal to direct, to control, or to be frontal in our attention demonstrates «the power not to do». <sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (2010), pp. 134-135.

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, p. 134. Refusal and avoidance increasingly powerful both as concepts and practices in decolonial scholarship and activism, see Tuck and Wayne Yang (2014) R-Words: Refusing Research. In: *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with youth and Communities*. Eds. D. Paris and M. T. Winn. Thousand Oakes (CA): Sage Publications, and C. L'Hirondelle (2011) Cree ++. *Critical Making*. Ed. Garnet Hertz.

It amounts to a suspension. This opens to a consciousness of something that is not given positively: a consciousness of the oblique, indeterminate or lateral. It opens towards a myriad of affective states, twisting through the sensory domain and moving beyond it.

(iii)

In this section we expand the argument that lateral passivity can be practised to emphasise that not-quite-sleep states are passively constitutive; and further, that in their performance they produce a residue. Merleau-Ponty captures the subtlety of attention required for somatic practices when he considers what sleep is not, striking a balance between nihilation and pure articulation: «*consciousness of ... something* [his italics and suspension points] is always consciousness of a difference between terms that are not given positively» and appear only through «forgetfulness, interruption of analysis». <sup>13</sup> Within this suspension is consciousness of «nothing that is something and something that is nothing», located at the edge of comprehension but within a corporeal field that contains more than one body. <sup>14</sup> His three suspension points contain the act of suspension as performed within the process of phenomenological reduction: letting a few breaths pass, permitting a temporal elongation, letting indeterminacy grow, waiting for the sensation to crystallise into something different from what it was before. A *de-differentiation*, where first to be released is the hard differentiation between clear consciousness and the deep not-knowing of unconsciousness.

Lateral implies indirect or oblique, Merleau-Ponty calls this non-confrontational passivity a «softness in the dough» of consciousness. <sup>15</sup> Pursuing the methodological line of argument further towards passive constitution, we revisit somatic practices that use imaginative visualisations. The act of holding and directing an inner visualisation is common to many somatic practices, whether this is of the spine extending upwards, tension softening, eyes in back of the body, transformation of texture or colour of parts of the body, or becoming organic substances (like butter, wheat, light, water). <sup>16</sup> The focus needs to be directed

(online at: <http://conceptlab.com/criticalmaking/PDFs/CriticalMaking2012Hertz-Placespp08to10-LHirondelle-Cree++.pdf>, last retrieved February 10, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (2010), p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> See Kozel, (2013) Somatic Materialism or “Is it possible to do a phenomenology of affect?”. *Site Journal of Art, Philosophy and Culture*, 33 (2013). 153-167.

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (2010), p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> This last technique features strongly in Fraleigh, S. (2010) *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy*. Chicago (IL): University of Illinois Press.

but subsequently released once the passive dynamic takes over. Similar to the seemingly passive side of Merleau-Ponty's famous chiasm of the touching-touched, when the subjective control of touching is released to let the plentiful qualities of being touched bloom in the relation of palpation, the release or transformation of a visualisation in a somatic practice is both volitional and responsive.<sup>17</sup>

It is a platitude to say that a powerful corporeal reaction can be produced by encountering a visual or poetic image—do we not feel tired when hearing of exhaustion, thirsty when reading about someone drinking water, a pull of gravity or lift of weightlessness when thinking of falling or flying? Reflecting on the passage where Merleau-Ponty referred to softness in the dough of consciousness drew me to the floor, compelled me to lie down and see what happened if I experimented with embodying a philosophical concept and practised letting my bones become dough. Would it be somatically or affectively different from following instructions to transform them to butter?

I noticed a drift of focus away from the starting point of dough, and invited a lateral quality to arise. The suggestion of laterality soon transformed into a sense of crystals growing into snowflakes; non-linear but deeply material. Another lateral shift had my focus again on the matter of my bones, with the fingers of one hand I traced some of the many small breakages in my body—for I have had many small fractures over the years, each one healed in a different way. Each is distinct on an x-ray, but my inner sense of them is imaginative and replete with memory. I donated the sense of my fingers and my softening consciousness to the areas of fracture, provoking responses in other parts of my body schema. Touching a healed clavicle produced a twinge in my ribcage. An old injury speaking to a current one. My connective tissue reacted as if plucked like a string, simply by attending passively to areas of prior trauma. (Kozel, January 2022)

Beginning with dough and ending with awareness of breakages did not simply demonstrate a variation of lateral flow to this brief somatic meditation: it revealed a glimpse of material transformation, for according to the corporeal logic of most somatic practices the act of holding an image produces shifts in the material substance of the body. Consider Merleau-Ponty's long citation of Sartre on sleepiness, where Sartre's use of the plural form «consciousnesses» is striking.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. A. Lingis. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press. 134.



I can still reflect, which is to say produce consciousnesses of consciousnesses. But to maintain the integrity of the primary consciousnesses, the reflective consciousnesses must let themselves be fascinated in turn, must not posit the primary consciousnesses in order to observe and describe them. They must partake of their illusions, posit the objects they posit, follow them into captivity. To tell the truth, a certain indulgence is necessary on my part. It remains in my power to shake this enchantment, to knock down these cardboard walls and to return to the wakeful world.<sup>18</sup>

Somatic practices enact lateral passivity by means of shifts in awareness. Once we attend to them, these not-quite-sleep states reveal, as Sartre says «consciousnesses of consciousnesses», but taking this argument further, the constitutive dynamic of lateral passivity opens beyond the confines of a self-contained sensory subject. Subjective consciousness becomes a de-differentiated plurality. Amplifying the multiplicity within one subject works to dispel the myth of isolated subjectivity by revealing shared corporeal histories, and a myriad of relations with others and things; Merleau-Ponty writes that transformation is «common work», that «comes as much from others and from things as from ourselves».<sup>19</sup> The broken bones in my body that rose to my attention by means of meditating on the dough of consciousness were all produced at moments shared with others, present and absent. The knots in my connective tissue hold these histories. Merleau-Ponty argues that lateral constitution not only «retains» and «ballasts» the frontal relation of *Sinnggebung*, but it relativizes the very fabric of the perceived world to permit common life, plurality and coexistence. Lateral passivity is a «movement towards integration, openness».<sup>20</sup>

### Sleep: Beyond *Sinnggebung*, Reference, and Identity

Sleep, in its unavoidable link with dreaming, is a case that illuminates the peculiar way Merleau-Ponty thinks about the passivity of consciousness in its relation to institution. We would like to focus on three main aspects: (i) the critique towards the Husserlian notion of *Sinnggebung*; (ii) the critique towards the Freudian notion of reference to/interest in the external world; (iii) the critique of the

<sup>18</sup> Sartre cited in Merleau-Ponty, (2010), p. 139.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 135.

notion of sense as identity. Our aim this way is to show how passivity as a sedimentation represents, in Merleau-Ponty, a powerful critique of the Husserlian intentional model and the phenomenological concept of constitution.

(i)

For Merleau-Ponty, the question of sleep arises against the background of a consciousness within which the referential power of intentionality is preliminary limited: in his interpretation, Husserl's intentional model implies that «consciousness» is always «consciousness of» and therefore, at least potentially, consciousness «of everything»;<sup>21</sup> on the contrary, Merleau-Ponty claims that «in order for there to be consciousness of *something*, there must not be consciousness of everything».<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty emphasizes this aspect of intentional consciousness despite the fact that, in Husserl's account, certain types of acts (such as panic, anxiety, angst) are not intentional, even though they are states of consciousness: however, such an emphasis is functional to the critique of the notion of *Sinngebung* that Merleau-Ponty elaborates in this text.<sup>23</sup> He rejects, therefore, the dialectical binarism that, in relation to the past content of consciousness (to the unconscious), leads to delineate the alternative between a past that would explain me entirely or a past whose meaning would be entirely constructed by me *ex nihilo*: the dialectical synthesis itself must be rejected in favour of a conception that «only accepts 'permanent realizations', not a realization that would be death».<sup>24</sup> If we assume this perspective, the solution to the problem of passivity is to be sought «in the perceived, i.e., pre-objective world, *Lebenswelt*» according to an endogenous causality «that is never pure activity of *Sinngebung*».<sup>25</sup> «Perception is not centrifugal *Sinngebung*», Merleau-Ponty insists:<sup>26</sup> he contrasts the concept of constitution with that of resumption, birth with rebirth. The analysis of perception, in fact, highlights a decisive aspect that Husserl had already pointed out and that Merleau-Ponty radicalises here: even in the field of immanent, reduced perception, the structural presence of retentions and adumbrations evokes an excess (a transcendence within the immanence) that

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 117.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ivi, p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Ivi, p. 123

transgresses the absoluteness of the phenomenological givenness.<sup>27</sup> Retention as consciousness of the *past*, as well as the presence of adumbrations that, though co-intentional, transcend the present impression, imply a constitutive and structural “absence,” a negativity that is not absolute or pure.<sup>28</sup> «The restriction of the analysis of the perceived is reduced to what resists objective ontology: the *Dingwahrnehmung* as mute contact with an endpoint: *Selbstgegebenheit*, *leibhaftiggeben*, presence. In reality, even at this level of Nature, it is the presence of an absence: infinite content, presentation by *Abschattungen*».<sup>29</sup> We could say «there is a crack in everything», even in intentional consciousness; and «that’s how the light gets in».<sup>30</sup> In Merleau-Ponty’s words: «consciousness [is not] the flux of *Erlebnisse*, but consciousness of lacks, of open situations».<sup>31</sup>

The analysis of perception must dwell not only on what is *leibhaftiggeben*, but also on what is revealed in the «gaps, ellipses, allusions, ‘divergence’, ‘variant’ of the thesis of the world», on a consciousness permeable to lateral infiltrations no less constitutive than its frontal and referential gaze: what emerges from these infiltrations is a series of preserved potentialities—the potentiality of the retentional past that is kept by consciousness, the potentiality of adumbrations to be illuminated according to a certain perceptual style. These potentialities are *preserved*, they come from afar, they have a history of sedimentation that belongs to the subject—belongs to her without the subject knowing it. This is precisely how Merleau-Ponty understands the unconscious, as we shall see: as a «sedimentation of the perceptual life»,<sup>32</sup> a «perception that is not knowledge».<sup>33</sup> If this is true, the mechanism of *Sinngebung* is deactivated—as an active constitution—with respects to these contents: they are not constituted but resumed.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Husserl, (2006) *The Basic Problem of Phenomenology. From the Lectures, Winter Semester, 1910-1911*. Trans. I. Farin and J. G. Hart. Dordrecht: Springer. 53-65.

<sup>28</sup> Passivity is both necessary and not absolute, not “frontal” or “pure”: it is never a direct invasion of the third person into the first. «Sleep and the unconscious [are] to be understood not as degradations of consciousness by the absurd mechanism of the body—invasion of the third person into the first—but as internal possibility of what we call consciousness» (M. Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 124).

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, p. 133.

<sup>30</sup> Cohen, (1992). “Anthem.”

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. 2010, p. 131.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 160.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, p. 164.

«Perception is resumption, not constitution»:<sup>34</sup> in this sense, perception in its passivity is institution.

As Merleau-Ponty writes in the first part of the *Course Notes* on the concept of institution: «To constitute in this sense [the sense of *Sinnggebung*] is nearly the opposite of to institute: the instituted makes sense without me, the constituted makes sense only for me and for the ‘me’ of this instant».<sup>35</sup> The institution has the function of *depositing* meaning, «not as an object left behind, as a simple reminder or as something that survives, as a residue. [It is deposited] as something to continue, to complete without being the case that this sequel is determined».<sup>36</sup> Isn't this exactly the description of the way in which the retentional past is grafted onto the impression and motivates the protensional openness to the future? Isn't this how adumbrations offer themselves to perception, as an invitation to continue perceiving, to complete perception without the completion being already determined (however pre-delineated)? Passivity as a (primarily perceptual) deposited, instituted sense places a historical limit on *Sinnggebung*: we don't constitute, but we resume a sense that is already deposited (instituted) in ourselves. We recognize that genesis is always bi-directional: of the given to us and of us to the given—«not two opposed movements (the objective history we create, and our *Sinnggebung* creating objective history), but even ‘objective’ history lives only in our life, and even our *Sinnggebung* are based on configuration of the past, are *urgestiftet* in it».<sup>37</sup> If sleep represents a passivity that is not absolute, but instituted in this specific sense, awakening is not birth but rebirth: it is not the passage from a moment in which nothing was for me to a moment in which everything is for me. «From the moment of conception and still more after birth, there is an encroachment towards a future which is made from itself, under certain given conditions, and which is not the act of a *Sinnggebung*: Birth [is not an act] of constitution but the institution of a future».<sup>38</sup> This implies that sleep (its sense) is not a “pure act”, and neither is awakening: it does

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 128.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Ivi, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Ivi, p. 133. «In short, we never have closed significations; we, like the humans of the past, have only open significations and situations whose sense is genesis» (ivi, p. 134).

<sup>38</sup> Ivi, p. 8.

not express, as Freud believed, «the suspension of interest in the external world».<sup>39</sup>

(ii)

Although in the pages of *Institution and Passivity* devoted to sleep, Merleau-Ponty directly refers to Sartre's thought, it is with Freud's introductory lectures on psychoanalysis (1915–1917) that he indirectly engages, in particular to the second part of the first series of lectures devoted to dreams.<sup>40</sup> Since Freud, unlike Merleau-Ponty, understands sleep as the act in which we actively withdraw our interest from the external world, he also understands awakening not as rebirth but as a new birth. «Each awakening in the morning is then like a new birth».<sup>41</sup> He interprets sleep in terms of activity, as something we *do*, something that we *want* and *seek*: «Sleep is a condition in which I wish to have nothing to do with the external world, and have withdrawn my interest from it. I put myself to sleep by withdrawing myself from the external world and by holding off its stimuli».<sup>42</sup> Merleau-Ponty questions this conception: to fall asleep, to sleep, is certainly something we do, but we are not really the *cause* of this action we perform—it is activity as abandonment, therefore not frontal but lateral passivity.

[It is necessary] to grasp what it is to *sleep*, falling asleep—in a sense an *act*, expressed by a verb—When I lie down I do something, I not only await for sleep, I *lend myself to sleep*—indulgence. The sleep of consciousness is not consciousness of sleep; sleep is the opposite of consciousness. (...) [Thus, it is not a matter of] frontal passivity (...), but [of a] passivity nevertheless: one abandons oneself.<sup>43</sup>

This characteristic feature of sleep is transmitted to the oneiric life that accompanies it. Merleau-Ponty first focuses on the question of the symbolic relationship between latent thoughts and the manifest content of sleep, finding access

<sup>39</sup> I am referring to the creative commons version of Freud's work translated by G. Hall. S. Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. Trans G. Hall. PDF Books. 73. (online at: <https://eduardolbm.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/a-general-introduction-to-psychoanalysis-sigmund-freud.pdf> and <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>, last retrieved: February 10, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> The reference would be to Lecture 5 on “Difficulties and Preliminary Approach”.

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, p. 74.

<sup>42</sup> Ivi, p. 73.

<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (2010), p. 142.

to this topic in the theme of symbolism (which recalls Lecture 10 of *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* on “Symbolism in the Dream”). The symbolic relationship is defined as follows by Freud: «We call such a constant relationship between a dream element and its interpretation symbolic. The dream element is itself a symbol of the unconscious dream thought». <sup>44</sup> In Merleau-Ponty’s words: «Dreams are symbolism. Something signifies a completely different thing, and not, as in waking, ‘itself’». <sup>45</sup> Thus the symbolic relationship presupposes the difference between latent and manifest content: Merleau-Ponty observes that this difference rests, in Freud, on a splitting or duplication of the activity of thought. Freud writes: «We can only say that the dreamer’s knowledge of symbolism is unconscious, that it is a part of his unconscious mental life. (...) But now we deal with something more; indeed, with unknown knowledge, with thought relationships, comparisons between unlike objects which lead to this, that one constant may be substituted for another». <sup>46</sup> Responsible for the splitting is repression «by which something in the mind is at once made inaccessible and preserved». <sup>47</sup> In temporal terms: the past of consciousness is not pure absence but presence as absence, i.e., something that is preserved and at the same time made inaccessible. In order to challenge the splitting of the life of consciousness into two ‘I think’—the one that censors and deforms and the one that dreams and produces the manifest content—it will then be necessary to challenge first of all the overwhelming power of repression. <sup>48</sup>

Although «Freud did not seek to reduce symbolism to repression,» he «does not deny the existence of an oneiric structure which is responsible for part of the way dreams look»: <sup>49</sup> for Merleau-Ponty, the splitting of oneiric life does not mean that the ‘I think’ is duplicated, but that we are in the presence of a non-intentional form of consciousness. Symbolism «delimits a functioning which is not ‘consciousness of something’ (simple, general function, *Erkenntnistheoretisch*), but development of a ‘world-for-me’». <sup>50</sup> The «theory of the second ‘I

<sup>44</sup> Freud, p. 130.

<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 151.

<sup>46</sup> Freud, p. 144.

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 175.

<sup>48</sup> It is interesting that a somewhat similar critique of the power of repression—also referred to Freud’s theory but primarily directed towards the discourses about sex in the contemporary age—is also found in the Michel Foucault’s (1998) *The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin).

<sup>49</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (2010), p. 154.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 151.

think’»<sup>51</sup> seems to impose itself on Freud because of the extreme deformation to which the latent content is subjected in the translation into manifest content, thus it is an effect of censorship: the unconscious thus appears as a second thinking subject ‘within’ the conscious thinking subject, which limits itself to receiving the oneiric formations produced by the first ‘I think’—a “demonology” that Freud himself had declared inadequate.<sup>52</sup> Freud thus reaffirms the “monopoly” of consciousness: it is still a subject (even if “second”) that we are talking about, the latent contents are still “thoughts.” However, «Freud’s most interesting contribution» is «not the idea of a second ‘I think’ which would know what we do not know about ourselves» but having discovered a field of non-intentional life of consciousness: it is, again, a matter of admitting that «being conscious» is not equivalent to «donate meaning».<sup>53</sup> Preservation and construction (of the past) are not opposed but accomplices: «to be conscious is to realize a certain divergence, a certain variation in the already instituted existential field, which is always behind us and whose weight, like that of a flywheel, intervenes up into the actions by which we transform it».<sup>54</sup> Being conscious is a certain doing, and at the same time presupposes a preserved, already instituted past.

The interesting aspect of Freudian repression is not, therefore, that of establishing the latent/manifest dichotomy or the splitting into two I/subjects, but rather that of installing—within the same subject—a paradoxical form of perception and thought, a perceiving and a thinking of which we know nothing, although they belong to us and are products of our activity (just like sleeping and dreaming).<sup>55</sup> It is precisely on this perceiving without knowing that Merleau-Ponty insists in order to reveal the ultimately non-representational and non-objective (in this sense, non-intentional) character of the passivity of consciousness: it is crucial that he mentions here the domain of desire and affective content, which indirectly refers—precisely on the question of non-representational intentionality—to Husserl’s theory of the *Triebintentionalität* (drive intentionality).

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, p. 199.

<sup>52</sup> Ivi, p. 207.

<sup>53</sup> Ivi, p. 206.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty repeatedly insists on this specific relevance of Freudian theory: «What is essential in Freudianism—he states on p. 208—is not to have shown that beneath appearances there is another reality altogether, but that the analysis of a given behavior always finds in it several layers of signification, that they all have their truth, and that the plurality of possible interpretations is the discursive expression of a mixed life (...)».

(iii)

Merleau-Ponty associates the perception without knowledge typical of the unconscious as pre-objective with a form of non-thetic consciousness, that is neither positing nor representational: «I see ‘things’ on the condition of not constituting them. If perceptual consciousness does not *posit* (...) it is because by nature it is sedimented consciousness, which does not actually constitute, which has never constituted; it is ‘openness to...’». <sup>56</sup> In this sense, the unconscious is nothing more than the sedimentation of perceptual life: it is not ignorance and not even (yet) knowledge. «The ‘affective content’ is not even unconscious or repressed (...), i.e., the unconscious as *pulsation of desire* is not behind our back (...). The unconscious [is] unknown acting and organizing dream and life, principle of crystallization (...), not behind us, fully within our field, but pre-objective (...)» <sup>57</sup>. The reference to drive and desire is decisive, as it allows us to recall and dynamise a fragment of phenomenological theory already proposed by Husserl. In the second book of *Ideas* the realm of passivity (as association) is described in these terms:

Sensibility, what imposes itself, the pre-given, the driven in the sphere of passivity. What is specific therein is motivated in the obscure background and has its “psychic grounds”, *about which it can be asked: how did I get there, what brought me to it?* <sup>58</sup>

According to Husserl, it is possible that in every mode of action there are «different mixtures of spontaneity and receptivity and everywhere spontaneity can be transformed into receptivity and vice versa (...). Receptivity, for its part, however, leads us into the background where we cannot properly speak of either spontaneity or receptivity». <sup>59</sup> At the most basic level, passivity is drive intentionality—*Triebintentionalität*, a term introduced by Husserl in HUA/XV: <sup>60</sup> it is the

<sup>56</sup> Ivi, p. 160.

<sup>57</sup> Ivi, p. 159. (My emphasis)

<sup>58</sup> Husserl (1989) *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer. Dordrecht: Springer. 234.

<sup>59</sup> Ms. A VI 3/5. (My translation)

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Husserl (1973) HUA/XV: *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass, Dritter Teil. 1929-1935*. Ed. I Kern. The Hague: M. Nijhoff. 595.



original form of relation between self and other than self and is first characterised as an empty, objectless intentionality—it is a drive, a movement of self-transcendence towards the other than self. This drive is at first completely indeterminate, a simple striving-to that can only be directed further to a specific object insofar as it is at first pure tension beyond consciousness: as such, drive intentionality can be interpreted as *desire*. The latter cannot be filled and completely satisfied by any specific object: each fulfillment only reinforces and reaffirms it. As observed by Renaud Barbaras, «desire, tendencies, instincts, and drives involve a singular and autonomous intentionality that is irreducible to any objectivating. We have here a relationship to something that cannot be an object».<sup>61</sup> Rather than lack, we should speak—just as in Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation—of *absence* as a specific mode of appearance that is not reducible to the mere negation of presence: absence is even more than an empty intentionality, it expresses a tension that cannot be exhausted in an object.

If, therefore, the drive conveys an original openness to the other—from self and precisely this openness can be defined as desire, then «the activity characteristic of passivity is desire», that is, desire «is the realized identity of an auto-affectation and hetero-affectation».<sup>62</sup> As desire, the drive is the place where the passive moment becomes structuring and constituting—but such a constitution resembles institution in Merleau-Ponty’s sense rather than *Sinngebung* in the Husserlian terms: «it constitutes only by letting itself be affected; it can open the world only by already entering the world and by being subjected therefore to its law: its initiative is radical passivity».<sup>63</sup> Already in the *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>64</sup> Merleau-Ponty states that perception (being) exceeds representation, for our experience is not restricted to the content of intentional representations. If this is true, the distinction and opposition between conscious and unconscious representations must be overcome in favour of an understanding of the unconscious in terms of a «sedimented practical schema».<sup>65</sup> «Instead of the

<sup>61</sup> Barbaras (2005) *Desire and Distance. Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press. 112.

<sup>62</sup> Ivi, p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Ivi, p. 131.

<sup>64</sup> See M. Merleau-Ponty (2003) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. D. A. Landes. Routledge: London. Part II.

<sup>65</sup> Kozyreva (2018) Non-representational Approaches to the Unconscious in the Phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty”. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Science*, 17 (2018) 1. 199-224: 206.

strictly dualistic idea separating conscious and unconscious processing, Merleau-Ponty develops the idea that the unconscious is a necessary part of my conscious experience. The unconscious thus is not the opposite of consciousness, it is ‘the very perceptual consciousness in its ambiguity, opacity, multiplicity of meanings, and unending quest for interpretation». <sup>66</sup> As also observed by Thomas Fuchs, the unconscious as “sedimented schema” is not simply a trace, the presence of an absence but, on the contrary, it is the absence in the mode of presence, the non-perceived in the perceived;<sup>67</sup> this absence is not, therefore, the opposite (the other face) of consciousness, but is a structural part of it and contributes to its very existence in the mode of opacity and imperfect transparency of the subject to herself.

If, then, the unconscious in its perceptual and affective form is a pre-objective knowledge, a non-thetic consciousness, which does not posit a thesis of existence since it is not constituting but sedimented, it escapes exhaustion and categorical subsumption without thereby excluding *all* types of knowledge: the knowledge at stake is that of the body-schema, since the unconscious is also a mode of embodiment, «a certain posture of my social body, my being for others, adopting a position through something in which it is found (...)». <sup>68</sup> This seems to be confirmed by the analysis of memory (recollection) as a way of reactivating the unconscious past: «Remembering something is remembering the manner in which we gained access to that something. And (...) it is through the body, thus remembering is a certain manner of being body». <sup>69</sup> More precisely: «To remember is to remember a former embodiment, and to have a body is also to have a past of embodiment; there is a time of the body, a temporal structure of embodiment». <sup>70</sup> It is then essential to the *potential of passivity* that we have a perception which is not *Sinnggebung*, *Zusammenstimmung*; signification, but rather a

<sup>66</sup> Stawarska (2008) Merleau-Ponty and Psychoanalysis. In: *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*. Eds. R. Diprose and J. Reynolds. Stockfield: Acumen. 57-69. Cited in A. Kozyreva, (2018), p. 208.

<sup>67</sup> See T. Fuchs (2012) Body Memory and the Unconscious. In: *Founding Psychoanalysis Phenomenologically*. Eds. D. Lohmar and J. Brudzinska. Dordrecht: Springer. 69-82.

<sup>68</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 193.

<sup>69</sup> Ivi, p. 194. Here, again, bidirectional genesis: «Double current of memory: from us to the past, but to a past first instituted through its former presence. We must lose in order to have (...)» (ivi, p. 198).

<sup>70</sup> Ivi, p. 201.

form of experience in which «we no longer know which gives and which receives, ‘response’ of the bodily whole to what it offers itself».<sup>71</sup>

### Waking: Disarticulations of Pure Experience

In this section we outline some of the places where passivity reveals its potential for diffraction or disarticulation. In addition to expanding philosophical references, we introduce authors from literature, Science and Technology Studies (STS) and cultural history to enter into dialogue and resonate with Merleau-Ponty. We liken the dizziness of waking to the disarticulation of experience that is required to address systemic inequity, exploring the potential for social change in the argument that awakening is not birth but is re-birth.

(i)

Consciousness as a body schema (*habitus*) and sedimented perception, as pre-objective and non-positing knowledge, implies in itself a «passage to the unarticulated object side and subject side at once».<sup>72</sup> As discussed in the middle section of this paper, it is a «softness in the dough of consciousness».<sup>73</sup> This means loosening the rigid distinction between subject and object, between natural or psychic being (humans) and things in order to enter their “unarticulated” point of contact—unity? Indistinction? The implication is a challenge to the principle «of the priority of conventional thought by identity».<sup>74</sup> On this point, Merleau-Ponty’s analysis—as a critique of the identitarian thought—meets Judith Butler’s feminist theory: «what prevents the latent meaning from being stated openly is that (...) the unity is undivided. This sex is not sex because it is everything».<sup>75</sup> The articulation of consciousness at the level of passivity is therefore a disarticulation or an articulation as indistinction: this is an opposite conception to that of Kant’s idealistic approach, in which experience is ordered for the purposes of knowledge by the synthetic and categorial activity of the pure Ego. Merleau-

<sup>71</sup> Ivi, p. 205. In other words: «(...) the life of consciousness is not *Sinngebung* in the constituting sense, but the fact that something happens to someone» (ivi, p. 217).

<sup>72</sup> Ivi, p. 132.

<sup>73</sup> Ivi, p. 136.

<sup>74</sup> Ivi, p. 153. Critique of identity and the subject/object—natural/cultural dualism: this is the aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s thought that is closest to Judith Butler’s critique of the identitarian way of thinking (cf. J. Butler (2006) *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge).

<sup>75</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (2010), p. 154.

Ponty's theory of experience can be referred to a different philosophical tradition, in particular to William James and Henri Bergson's philosophy. Both these authors proposed an idea of "pure experience" as a point of contact between subject and object, as a threshold of indistinction prior to any cognitive dualism. In his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, William James writes:

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff "pure experience," then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its "terms" becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, [4] and the other becomes the object known.<sup>76</sup>

The *same content*, the same part of pure experience can enter either as a "thought" into a series of associations or as a "thing" into a series of other associations: «and, since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once».<sup>77</sup> The indistinct character of which James speaks is not, by the way, chaos; rather, it is a matter of different roles played by the same element. Pure experience is the moment that precedes the splitting of these roles and welcomes their unity.

Something similar holds in *Time and Free Will* by Henri Bergson.<sup>78</sup> In the second chapter of the book he introduces the concept of "pure duration" understood as that subjective time of consciousness which is irreducible to spatial representation and therefore neither measurable nor subdividable into discrete parts like outer space. Bergson distinguishes two meanings of multiplicity: that of material objects, which implies the mutual externality of things and thus their numerability, and that of mental states, which are not external to one another and cannot be counted unless they are symbolically represented in space. In *Matter and Memory* this view is further developed through the introduction of the concept of "image," which is defined by Bergson as follows: «by 'image' we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a

<sup>76</sup> W. James (1996) *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Ed. R. Barton Perry. Lincoln (NE): University of Nebraska Press. 7.

<sup>77</sup> Ivi, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Bergson (2001) *Time and Free Will. An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Trans. Pogson. Mineola-New York: Dover Publications.

representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing;—an existence placed half-way between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’». <sup>79</sup> For Bergson too, as for James, it is crucial «(...) to consider matter before the dissociation which idealism and realism have brought about between its existence and its appearance». <sup>80</sup> Both Bergson and Merleau-Ponty devote a central chapter of their works (respectively: *Matter and Memory* and *Phenomenology of Perception*) to the body: Bergson identifies the body as a privileged image. «All seems to take place as if, in this aggregate of images which I call the universe, nothing really new could happen except through the medium of certain particular images, the type of which is furnished me by my body». <sup>81</sup> My body as a centre of action with its specific surrounding, its specific position in the world is what I am aware of “from the inside” and is at the same time the object of perception by other body-subjects: it is a subject-object, where the “-” is *not* an index of intentionality and reference. «[There is a] subject-object solidarity», Merleau-Ponty observes, «which is not that of *noesis* and *noema*, but that of the body and the perceived world». <sup>82</sup> Such a “solidarity” is precisely what we suggest we understand in terms of disarticulation/indistinction.

(ii)

Consider waking as a mode of disarticulation, wherein one is simultaneously aware of oneself from the inside and as the object to the wakeful consciousnesses of oneself and others. One is more than disarticulated, one is diffracted, cross-cut by physiological, affective and political currents. Turning to Karen Barad for an account of diffraction that is both material and cultural, we learn that it is «a tool of analysis for attending to and responding to the effects of difference». <sup>83</sup> In an often cited passage, she credits Donna Haraway with inspiring her by demonstrating how critical methods of reflexivity risk being stuck in sameness, while diffractions are differently attuned: when applied as a method it opens ontolog-

<sup>79</sup> Bergson (1911) *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N. M. Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George Allen and Unwin. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ivi, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Ivi, p. 5. (Bergson’s italics)

<sup>82</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (2010), p. 158.

<sup>83</sup> Barad (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 72.

ical variations. She cites Haraway: «a diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of differences appear». <sup>84</sup> Locating sleep in the world of material conditions reconfigures it into diffracted impulses that overlap and extend into one another. Ontologically, patterns of difference make a difference, citing Barad they are «the fundamental constituents that make up the world»: just as life patterns impact sleep and can be particularly felt in the disarticulation of waking. <sup>85</sup>

Aligning the materiality of Barad's approach to physics with Merleau-Ponty's work on passivity is not such a stretch when the dizziness of waking is considered, it helps to anchor lateral constitution in the matter of bodies and the world. They both seek a radical material ontology. Merleau-Ponty asks «“Why [is] phenomenology poorly understood?” [sic]; regarding his course of lectures on philosophy and the phenomenon of passivity he asserts that the year's analyses will move closer to «his true phenomenological ontology». <sup>86</sup> With a similar radicality, Barad develops diffraction as an analytical tool for attending to difference and constructing an ontology of entanglement and reconfiguration. Lefort's reading of Merleau-Ponty moves him even closer to Barad's dynamic ontology of diffraction, for his reading of passivity in Merleau-Ponty posits it as a modality of our relationship with the world, not a static state. Lefort sees in Merleau-Ponty the dynamics of fields and orientations. <sup>87</sup>

The effects of sleep that we experience upon waking point to more than an assessment of whether we are rested or exhausted: the diffraction patterns of waking encompass attitudes towards sleep and the societal conditions that produce or hinder it. Perhaps it becomes more a question of the intervals between sleeps: shift workers, carer's of babies, bodies in pain and insomniacs do not have the luxury of sleeping only at night. Beautiful and poetic accounts of sleep feel like the dream of privilege. Sara Ahmed's reorientations are relevant, such as her reminder of how Husserl, sitting on his chair at a desk and inserting these objects into his reflections, sustained his orientation towards writing with the support of a feminine space dedicated to the work of care—a wife, servants and

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. See D. Haraway (1992) *The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others*. In: *Cultural Studies*. Eds. L. Grossberg et al. New York: Routledge. 295-337.

<sup>85</sup> Barad, (2007), p. 72.

<sup>86</sup> Merleau-Ponty, (2010), p. 139.

<sup>87</sup> Ivi, p. xx.

children in the background performing the labour of life.<sup>88</sup> Jean Luc Nancy's meditations on sleep produce a similar unease in a feminist reader, until he inserts a passage late in his text that accounts for the acute disarticulations of sleep for those living in war zones: «World in shambles, out of balance, uneven enough to make sleep itself devastated by unevenness».<sup>89</sup>

Sleep is both seductive and cruel. It is possible to need it, desire it and fear it. A desire for the oblivion of sleep, exists in counterpoint with trepidation that it will be elusive, painful, disrupted. Sleep can be a release from daily struggles, or a painful reminder of the troubled state of the world and the brutal socio-economic factors impacting sleep: sleep deprivation has been classified as a form of racism, a residue of colonialism, and a systemic imbalance in favour of the white middle classes. Rest can be a form of refusal, a “shapeshifting” of bodies, politics and imaginaries.<sup>90</sup> In her book *Black Fatigue* Mary-Frances Winters writes,

What is black fatigue? We need to start there. It's repeated variations of stress caused by centuries of racism resulting in extreme exhaustion, causing physical, mental and spiritual maladies that are passed down from generation to generation. There is a cycle and that cycle starts with unmitigated systemic racism, moving to intergenerational stress and trauma, which causes inherited racist disparities in health.<sup>91</sup>

Benjamin Reiss identifies a hidden history of sleep, hidden when it is addressed in biological terms only. Not only is sleep cultural and historical, he reminds us that it is subject to re-engineering. The conditions for the possibility of sleep are

<sup>88</sup> Ahmed (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 31.

<sup>89</sup> Jean Luc Nancy's paradoxical work on sleep offers both glimpses of pure escapism of sleep and awareness of external events affecting sleep. Jean Luc Nancy (2009) *The Fall of Sleep*. Trans. C. Mandell, New York: Fordham University Press, 38.

<sup>90</sup> See Werle (2021) Resting & dreaming: an assemblage of black feminist futurity”. In: *String Figures: Living Now and Living Otherwise*, Medium.com (online at: <https://medium.com/@stringfiguresonlinejournal/resting-dreaming-an-assemblage-of-black-feminist-futurity-e9f22febd58>, last retrieved February 10, 2022).

<sup>91</sup> Winters (2021) Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit. *InfoQ* (online at: <https://www.infoq.com/presentations/black-fatigue/>, last retrieved February 10, 2022).

unevenly distributed across race, gender and class.<sup>92</sup> He calls attention to how racial inequality tends to be discussed in terms of factors that affect people when they are awake.<sup>93</sup> When the diffractions of intersectionality are played out in the habits, rituals and practices of sleep, the effects are differently felt according to race, gender, sexual orientation, age, affluence, technological and historical oppression. This is a reminder of how a phenomenology of sleep is particularly vulnerable to latent universalising assumptions, as Merleau-Ponty is aware when he warns: «do not consider only the “natural” body, consider everything that is sedimented above and describe the subject resolutely not as consciousness... but as the X to which fields (practical no less than sensory) are open».<sup>94</sup> History, imagination, ideology and myth contribute to the sedimentation of these fields, personal, familial, cultural. These are not objects of thought—they would be hidden, destroyed or abstracted by being subjected to analytic observation or an isolating attitude.<sup>95</sup>

### Conclusion

Why does Merleau-Ponty exhort his readers to examine the field that can contain sleep and wakefulness, consciousness and unconsciousness, memory and forgetfulness?<sup>96</sup> The re-articulation of sense as divergence or non-identity? We argue that he does this to point to an ontology of the perceived world that shifts our relationship with the world. Returning to the words by Claude Lefort in his foreword, Merleau-Ponty’s project in teaching a course on *Institution and Passivity* is «to lead an attack against the root of modern ontology».<sup>97</sup> Passivity is revelatory and has been neglected. In attending to the dynamic constitutive potential of passivity, the subject is placed within a completely different set of power relations. A new field, composed by responding to different orientations

<sup>92</sup> Reiss (2017) *Wild Nights: How Taming Sleep Created our Restless World*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>93</sup> Reiss (2017) African Americans Don’t Sleep as Well as Whites, An Inequality Stretching Back to Slavery. *LA Times Op Ed* (online at: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-reiss-race-sleep-gap-20170423-story.html>, last retrieved February 10, 2022).

<sup>94</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 124.

<sup>95</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1987) *The Philosopher and His Shadow*. In: *Signs*. Trans. Richard C. McLeary. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press. 160.

<sup>96</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 137.

<sup>97</sup> Ivi, p. xix.



between subjects and others. A field that involves levels, dimensions and horizons, where things exceed the limits of the observable and we no longer sustain distinctions between self and other: «we project ourselves into others at the same time as we perceive ourselves in others».<sup>98</sup> Within this field we «donate sense to what appears only by responding to a solicitation from the outside», the corporeal subject is placed in a position of responsivity.

In this essay we aimed to show the possible potential of passivity, as understood by Merleau-Ponty, as a place of disarticulation of classical phenomenological (Husserlian) intentional consciousness. Although it is not always explicit in the text (given also its fragmentary and unsystematic nature) that the target of the critical rethinking of the concept of *Sinngebung* is Husserl, it seems to us that Merleau-Ponty's reflection conveys a critical potential that invests the Husserlian model—with the limitations we have highlighted. Somatic states, sleep and dream consciousness, *Triebintentionalität* and the dynamics of desire expose those «gaps, ellipses, allusions, 'divergence', 'variant' of the thesis of the world» that do not constitute the mere residues of phenomenological reduction, but represent the conditions of possibility of the field of consciousness—the “excess” that remains implicated and even entangled in the very fabric of consciousness. If it is true that, phenomenologically speaking, “there is *more* than meets the eye,” this is possible only insofar as there is something *less*—something that is subtracted—from/within consciousness. In this way, the radical ontological shift evident in Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes on the phenomenon of passivity can contribute to contemporary phenomenologies of embodied, performative and political coexistence, capable of revealing and transforming complex corporeal relations.

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<sup>98</sup> Ivi, p. xx.

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