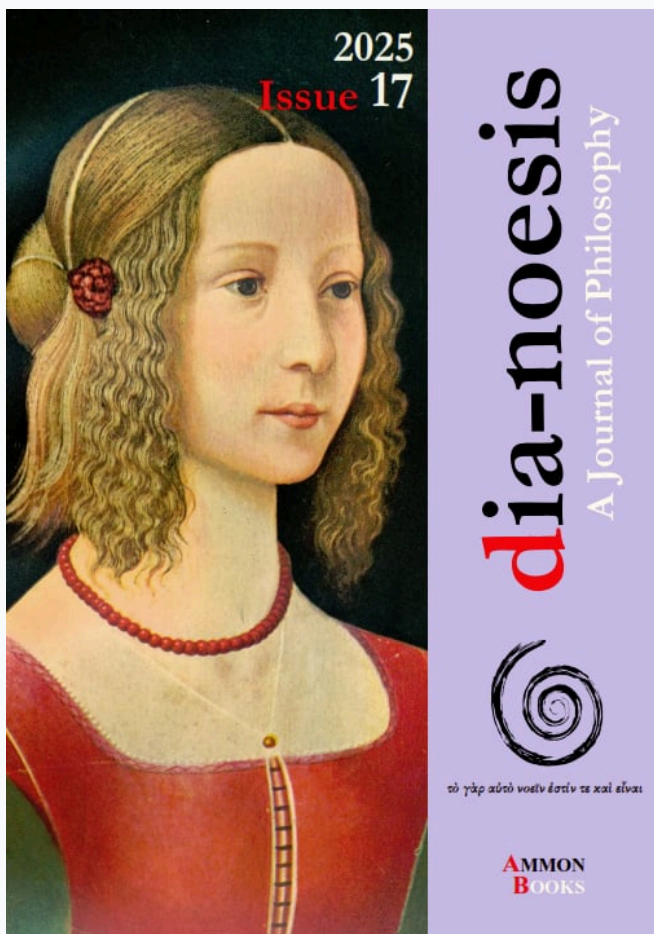


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The image of woman in philosophy



Philosophical interpretations of the image of women as performative act of gendered body and as bodily orientation in space:

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**Philosophical interpretations of the image of
women as performative act of gendered body
and as bodily orientation in space:
M. Merleau-Ponty - J. Butler
- S. Ahmed - Deleuze**

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Abstract

This article deals with the issue of the image of women through the body and physicality in general in a dia-phenomenological sense. That is, through M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, J. Butler's phenomenological approach to the relation between the "construction" of gender and the performative act, S. Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology and the orientation of queer things or moments in space and finally Deleuze's topology of the body. The woman as an image will be linked to the image of the body which is both an object and a subject of the action which concerns its position in relation to gender. The body exists in space together with its sexuality which emerges from its performative action of body not only as biological being but as also sexual being through performative act.

Key-words: *Phenomenology, body-image, gender, performative act, body-orientation, construction of gender, trans-nomadic, queer phenomenology*

Introduction

As early as the "La structure du comportement"¹ and later in the "La Phénoménologie de la perception"², M. Merleau-Ponty puts the body at the center and introduces us to concepts such as *spatiality*, *bodily*, *proper body*. It is via this medium that the body presents us with a phenomenon in which there is identification of both subject and object. In the first part of "Phénoménologie de la perception", part III, entitled "La spatialité du corps propre et la mortificité"³, Merleau-Ponty examines the relationship between the body proper and spatiality. Consequently, he conceptualizes specific actions of bodily components as a unified bodily scheme (*schéma corporel*). M. Merleau-Ponty expands the concept of bodily scheme beyond of sensory-motor or kinesthetic function of body. This leads us to a second definition:

“On s’achemine donc vers une seconde définition du schéma corporel: il ne sera plus le simple résultat des associations établies au cours de l’expérience, mais une prise de conscience globale de ma posture dans le monde intersensoriel, une «forme» au sens de la Gestaltpsychologie”⁴

This definition has deep examined by physiology, and it don’t include an ontological position. M. Merleau-Ponty uses it to clarify that the spatiality of body is beyond a kinesthetic situation. The physical shape as form constitutes a “new place of existence”⁵. Psychologists have observed that body shape is dynamic. According to M. Merleau-Ponty, this dynamic means that the body as such "appears to me as a posture" during an action to be performed. Consequently, the

¹ Merleau-Ponty M., *La structure de la comportement*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1942.

² Merleau-Ponty M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945.

³ Merleau-Ponty M., (ed.), *La spatialité du corps*, Gallimard, 1945, pp.114-172.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.116.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.116.

spatiality of the subject in action is not a "spatiality of position"⁶ but a "spatiality of situation"⁷. The performance of any physical activity is determined by the accuracy of the positions of my bodily parts and the completion of my activity. Hence the bodily form assumes a value beyond its 'biological essence'. At this point it is worth mentioning that in Lacanian field psychoanalysis and in Dolto's theory of the body and the subject in the psychoanalytic clinic, the wholeness of the body is imaginary, because of "stadium of mirror" of lacanian theory of human's development. The physical shape is common to all subjects while the imaginary "body image" is specific to each subject. The activation of the body as a subject is always related, we would say, to a performative act. The bodily figure follows the performance while the "body image" makes the performance unique for each subject. This means that on the one hand the phenomenon of the subject's bodily through the bodily figure has the consciousness as its intentionality and on the other hand the "body image" has the unconscious as its intentionality. At this point it is worth mentioning that in psychoanalysis of Lacanian field, and in Dolto's theory of the body and subject in psychoanalytic clinic, the wholeness of body is imaginary. The body's shape is common to all subjects, but the imaginary "body's image" is unique for each subject. The activation of the body is always associated with a performative act. The bodily form follows the performance of body, and the imaginary "body's image" makes unique the body's performance for a subject. That is, on the one hand, the phenomenon of the subject's bodily as bodily form has an intentionality towards consciousness, and the other hand, the "body's image" has an intentionality towards unconscious.⁸ That is, for Dolto the bodily figure is idiomatic. And it imparts the existence of the human species. My reference to a particular position of my body in space us-

⁶ Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.116

⁷ Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.116

⁸ Mitrou Y., *Performance art: unconscious, body, performative act*, Barbounakis, 2020.

ing the adverb "here" means in fact, as M. Merleau-Ponty points out, that "I establish the first coordinates to anchor my energetic body within an object, that is, the state of the body in relation to its work to be performed"⁹. The body and the bodily space it occupies will be related to all that exists around it because it is not only an object but also a subject which is characterized by its performative actions; the body thus acquires an ontological style. It then happens to "be in the world through its bodily form"¹⁰. The body is space, and the body proper defines the subject-body through the "shape-background" structure. All bodily schemes that appear or disappear to us need a background that will support their visibility or non-visibility. Thus, our apparition in the world is bodily, as the subject couldn't exist without the body. So, the body-subject activated through its bodily scheme and acquires a body proper. The spatiality of body exists because of its performative orientation, is the case with spatial positions. Their discrimination requires an "oriented space"¹¹. The "body image" as an imaginary totality is present in every action, like the "body shape". Thus, if there is a bodily orientation then both follow that orientation.

We will demonstrate that the image of gender in general and the image of woman in particular, through this phenomenological approximation are a performative act and a bodily orientation as well. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la Perception*:1945), as we have mentioned, the body assumes a central and fundamental role as the ground of perception and experience of the world. For this reason, the influence of M. Merleau-Ponty on feminist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and later Judith Butler and S. Ahmed, is decisive. Thus, the way is opened for the new theories of gender and feminist approaches to the image of women which were based on the concept of the

⁹ Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.117

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.117

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty M., *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.118

body introduced by the phenomenology of M. Merleau-Ponty and the psychoanalysis of the Lacanian field¹².

In contrast to Cartesian separationist thinking, where the body is treated as one object among others in the physical world, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is our "means of being in the world" - a body-subject rather than merely a body-object. The body is already imbued with meaning and perception; through it we inhabit the world. Perception, according to Merleau-Ponty, is not an abstract, intellectual fact, but an embodied experience. The body is what places us in space, allows us to move, interact and perceive the world. Therefore, there is no separation between the "I" and the body - the body is the "I", it is the place of being. Also, the body in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is gendered. That is, it appears with an orientation. He characteristically states:

“Cherchons à voir comment un objet ou un être se met à exister pour nous par le désir ou par l’amour et nous comprendrons mieux par là comment des objets et des êtres peuvent exister en general”¹³.

While Merleau-Ponty does not analyse gender in the terms developed later in feminist theory, it does provide a basis for an embodied understanding of gender. His approach to gender focuses on how gender is experienced through the body rather than as a biological or socially imposed identity in isolation. For Merleau-Ponty, gender is not an external category imposed on the subject, but something that is *inhabited* - it is a way of being in the world. Gender, like every other dimension of embodied existence, arises from the lived way in which the individual relates to his or her body and the world. It is not merely physical or social, but existential.

¹² Lacanian field is the field of jouissance which characterizing lacanian psychoanalysis.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, p.180

Trans. Mitrou Y., “Let us try to see how an object or a being comes to exist for us through desire or love, and we will then understand better how objects and beings can exist in general”.

From the body as gendered being and construction of gender to woman's image in J. Butler's theory

Although Merleau-Ponty does not extensively analyze gender in the terms developed later in feminist theory, he does offer a foundation for an embodied understanding of gender. His approach to gender focuses on how gender is experienced through the body, rather than as a biological or socially imposed identity in isolation. Thus, gender in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not an external category that is imposed on the subject, but something that is *inhabited*—it is a way of being in the world. Gender, like every other dimension of embodied existence, arises from the lived way in which an individual relates to his or her or its body and to the world. It is not merely physical or social, but existential. The concept of the bodily scheme introduced to us involves ontological features. Bodily spatiality is not an extensibility of the body as an object but is an ontological unfolding of the body as a *living subject*.

The influence of Merleau-Ponty's thought on feminist theory was particularly strong. Merleau-Ponty's philosophical position was a source of inspiration for Simone de Beauvoir, particularly in her work, *The Second Sex*, where she examines how women experience their bodies in a world that identifies them as 'other'. S. Beauvoir relies on phenomenology to demonstrate that women's bodies are not a biological destiny, but a historically and culturally shaped experience. So, for her, body is not a natural fact. Later, theorists such as Judith Butler revisit ideas of embodied subjectivity, deconstructing fixed gender categories. Butler, though critical of some phenomenological presuppositions, builds on the phenomenological understanding of gender as lived experience to advance a theory of gender as performative act. After all, she subscribes to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty's conception of and position on the gendered body as an historical idea which co-authored by cultural environment rather a natural species. Then the body appears as “Être sexué” (gen-

dered body). M. Merleau-Ponty analyses these conditions in part V of *Phenomenology of Perception* entitled "Le corps comme Être sexué" and he examines the relationship between gendered body and desire for sexual pleasure as body's hedonism.¹⁴

The body in Merleau-Ponty is not only a carrier of passive experience, but also a potential agent of action, movement and meaning-making. Hence the body becomes a carrier of resistance to the concept of "silent thinking of the body" (la pensée muet du corps) and he suggests that the body knows and acts beyond reason. Gender, in this light, is not a final, fixed category, but a constantly negotiated mode of being. We would also add that it has a bodily orientation. That is, at the same time, as a subject it is the bearer of a performative action, and it is oriented towards an object in space as well. Both states relate to the gendered appearance of the body they co-create. The "living body" is the body that appears as a "living subject" which is defined through its act. Embodied experience, then, can also become a field of resistance against dominant normative principles that try to limit the concept of gender to narrow, biological or social definitions. The gendered body emerges as a synthesis of image that includes the spatiality scheme, a bodily orientation and a performative act. Therefore, every image of a woman is a function of the gendered body. In the phenomenology of perception Merleau-Ponty concludes that we are our body. This conclusion follows from the view of the body as a living subject. It essentially refers to the body's relation to the lived world. In the other side, in lacanian psychoanalysis, the body relates with the unconscious of subject, and we are not our body, but we have our body. The subject of unconscious doesn't know what to do exactly this body. For us the gendered body, its orientation and its performative action have an intentionality to subject's unconscious as well.

¹⁴ Vavouras E., "Hobbes hedonism in front of classical hedonism and the free market's way", *Dia-noesis*, 13, 2022, pπ. 85-114.

In beginning of J. Butler's essay¹⁵ on performative acts and gender constitution she has written:

“Philosophers rarely think about acting in the theatrical sense, but they do have a discourse of ‘acts’ that maintains associative semantic meanings with theories of performance and acting. For example, John Searle’s ‘speech acts,’ those verbal assurances and promises which seem not only to refer to a speaking relationship, but to constitute a moral bond between speakers, illustrate one of the illocutionary gestures that constitutes the stage of the analytic philosophy of language. Further, ‘action theory,’ a domain of moral philosophy, seeks to understand what it is ‘to do’ prior to any claim of what one ought to do.”¹⁶

So, she introduces us in phenomenological theory of acts of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead where social reality constituted by social agent “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign”. The traditional phenomenological position suggests the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language who acts as unique source of constituting acts.

J. Butler subscribes to a more radical approximation of issue of construction that considers the social agent as an object rather than as a subject of constitutive acts. The philosopher is influenced by philosopher by M. Merleau-Ponty’s “Phenomenology of Perception” and subscribes to his teaching on the body a living subject that “comes to bear cultural meanings”. In same essay, J. Butler will write:

“[...] the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities, a complicated process of appropriation which any phenomenological theory of embodiment needs to describe. In order to describe the gendered body, a phenomenological theory of constitution requires an expansion of the conventional view of acts to

¹⁵ Butler J., “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *Theatre Journal*, 40:4, 1988, pp. 519-531

¹⁶ Butler J., “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, *Theatre Journal*, 40:4:1988, p.519

mean both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted”¹⁷

J. Butler’s view of constitution of gender is performative acts which have similarities with theatrical performative acts. She has examined the ways in which bodily acts construct gender and that there are many possibilities for its cultural transformation “through such acts”.¹⁸ J. Butler subscribes to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body, where it is a historical idea and a set of possibilities that continually materialized. This means that its appearance in the world with intentionality the perception does not need an inner substance, and that its expression in the world relates with a set of historical possibilities which are in potential determined. The body is not “a self-identical or merely factual materiality but it is a materiality that carries meaning”¹⁹. This meaning is “fundamentally dramatic”²⁰, J. Butler refers in her essay. The dramatization of meaning is a result of potentiality possibilities within historical conventions which are determined at each age. Thus, our body is made by us as embodied being. So, the body is a historical situation as Beauvoir has claimed and Butler agrees, and the same time she explains that this historical situation emerges from three elementary structures of embodiment: doing, dramatizing, reproducing. J. Butler refers characteristics:

“This doing of gender is not merely a way in which embodied agents are exterior, surfaced, open to the perception of others. Embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies or what Sartre would perhaps have called a style of being or Foucault, “stylistics of existence”. This style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporal style*, an act, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where performative itself carries the double-meaning of dramatic and non-referential.”²¹.

¹⁷ Butler J., p.521

¹⁸ Butler J., p.521

¹⁹ Butler J., p.522

²⁰ Butler J., p.522

²¹ Butler J., p.522

What does it mean that a woman is in a “historical situation”? It means the body undergoes cultural construction through various conventions that limit actions, performances, and perceptions of the body. J. Butler concludes that gender, as a "cultural significance" of the sexed body, is shaped by various acts and their cultural perceptions. Thus, sex and gender cannot be distinguished. We consider that theory drawn by phenomenology of body, anthropology and theory of performance and theatrical performative act. So, the image of woman emerges through the gendered body and performative acts of which is the bearer and their cultural perception. J. Butler writes:

“As consequence, gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior ‘self’ is conceived as sexed or not. As performance, which is performative, gender is an ‘act’ broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. As opposed to a view such as Erving Goffman’s which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various ‘roles’ within the complex social expectations of the ‘game’ of modern life. I am suggesting that this self is not only irretrievably ‘outside’, constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publically regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication.”²²

The culture punishes and marginalizes those who can’t or doesn’t want to accept the imaginary essence of gender and the socially imposed image of gender and therefore of woman. As a technical image of constructivist happiness.²³ This fact is enough to understand that there is social knowledge that gender is not an ontological sense but that the true or falsity of gender is a social imposition.

²² Butler J., p.528

²³ Mitrou Y., “The construction of happiness in the world of technical images”, *Flusser Studies* 37, 2024.

Becoming woman as a Transversality

The cultural and social stigma of bi-polar stands even in our days as a power formation which tends to reproduce itself masqueraded in identity politics and false activism of various types as the same power formation, repeating incessantly the separation, inequality, prejudice and exemption not only against women but also against what stands beside woman as queer, black people emigrants, minoritarian of every kind. Power formations necessarily appear in the vertical and hierarchical topology and in a striatum a rigid plane of authority.

Deleuze and Guattari in "A thousand Plateaus"²⁴ supersede the system of bipolar identification of gender as male and female, with the "becoming woman" which opens the flow of -n- sexes as Deleuzoguattarian theory requires. "Becoming woman" is more than a gender theory; it represents the fundamental form of becoming that resists transgressions against state power in the era of late capitalism. Our aim is to show how power formations operate today and how the eidetic change of the political topology from verticality to transversality responds to them. It is equally important to consider which are the practical and political issues that arise in postmodern culture and hegemonic global society.

Transversality can form in relation to women a war machine; a woman procreates and supports life and also fills the nature-culture gap whenever it is needed, while her allies are lined up around her. She never accepts or legitimizes a war of Power formations, because she and her allies must fight against the destruction of the Earth, her proper metonymy. Transversality is also linked to enunciation and autopoiesis; it is characterized by Deleuze and Guattari as trans-monadic and transitive. The woman transversely subsumes - through a non-excluding connectivity, not only the human beings, but all the other entities in the world, organic and inorganic, animals, stones, crystals and stars. A woman can be aligned in series of beings, body to body, because she is embodied, en-

²⁴ Deleuze J., Guattari, F., *Capitalism et Schizophrénie.2. Mille plateau*, Les Editions de Minuit, 1980.

gendered and embedded, she doesn't need to absorb, to annex, to conquer she only cares for continuity and uninterrupted flow. Man is a cartographer and an explorer, but the woman the cartography itself; more than being related with the earth is the personification of the primordial Earth, the Gaia, ever resisting to Chaos and the ecological destruction.

There is an intersectionality, a reciprocal intervention between form and content -as Deleuze requires- with transversality as form and the becoming woman as the content. Female's exception from all the dominant systems of occident Metaphysics now is reversed and gives priority to female pensée sauvage. As Levi-Strauss delignates in his book "The Raw and the cooked"²⁵, speaking about the position of the female there is always a double opposition between the bipolar gender [only male and female], amid a tertiary system where the female stands against the oppression of all the entities by the male patriarch the phallogocentric Ego. So, there are three terms: the binary male, the tertiary male, female and the opposition of the female -the female seeking a new equilibrium through culture or Art. And it is indeed the political unconscious which resists all dualities, and it is tied to the female as the position of primal regression. The return of the repressed produces a tertiary position -neither male nor female, -as byproducts of Patriarchy but as the gender of free identification.

Transversality responds and also highlights the primordial importance of practical and political issues to Guattari's conceptual work. As we will see, Guattari conceived of transversality in relation to the Leninist cut; it thus is linked to democratic centralism and to the subject-group. That is counted as a characteristic of the Openness of Deleuze and his understanding of an all-inclusive gender emerging from disjunctive choices. The transversality is also linked to enunciation and auto-poesis; it is characterized by Guattari as trans-nomadic and transitive. The notion of transversality will also be posed in relation to the becoming of the woman

²⁵ Lévi-Strauss Cl., *Mythologiques Le cru et le cuit*, Plon Paris, 1964.

for the mechanical formation of a war machine against state power.

Transversality from the other side is as a conceptual and pragmatic motor for the generation of heterogeneity including the writing he undertook with Deleuze. It promotes the rupture and redistribution of hierarchical structures, the mobilization of operations of deterritorialization across the social and cultural field, and it gains a ‘chaosmic’ dimension in the later writings, but its ‘origins’, however, are to be found in Guattari’s early work at the Psychiatric “Clinique de la Borde” and in militant Marxist movements in the 1950s and early 1960s. This is an initial and necessarily provisional effort to embed the concept in a social and therapeutic pragmatics and thus counter a debatable tendency towards a dilution or diffusion of transversality in theoretical abstraction, where it risks becoming a synonym for a generalized sense of creative differentiation.

Womanhood is also used as a critical concept for literary criticism. Transversality has been introduced by Deleuze in the second edition of *Proust and Signs*.²⁶ The concept concerns the kind of communication proper to the transversal dimension of machinic literary production. Transversality defines a modern way of writing that departs from the transcendent and dialectic presuppositions of the Platonic model of reminiscence and envisions an immanent and singularizing version instead. Woman is the gravitational center of the *Recherche du temps perdu* saga, a multifaceted woman (Odette-Albertine, Mme Verdurin, Duchesse de Guermantes) represents the always missing *objet petit a* of desire²⁷ where implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously can constitute both the lack and the excess. By her nature in procrea-

²⁶ Deleuze G., *Proust et les Signes*, Press Universitaires de France, 1971.

²⁷ The lacanian object of *jouissance* which functions as an accumulator of it. Cf. Kobow, B. S., “The Erotic and the Eternal: Striving for the Permanence of Meaning”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (2), 2021, pp. 213–236. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.26714>

tion woman is the one capable to do the expenditure of everything she has for stabilizing the flow of human becoming, at any expense.

Also called the “anti-logos style”²⁸, the transversal assembles heterogeneous components under a unifying position of the woman, the only female prerogative-which is far from being total-Plato living in a society of men erects his magnificent mental edifice only trying to imitate the Idea, and reproduce what is stable and transcendent, but at the cost of ignoring subordinates and excluding women.

Women. Plato’s critique focuses on the on the issue of intelligence always coming before, where the disjunctive use of faculties merely serves as a prelude for the unifying dialectic found in a single logos. In the contrary in modernity and post-modernity a simulacrum reminiscence departs from subjective associations and culminates in an originating viewpoint: Unification at the expense of what is called “The second sex” by Simone de Beauvoir in her famous non arithmetical paradigm; “one sex only with only one gender”, the second is just a solidified part of man’s shoulder, the male is the sole actant in the Platonic “Politeia” of today of today. On the contrary in literature, -Proust for example- seeks the disjunctive use of faculties unhinged from this transcendent and dialectic model and works on an immanent principle where intelligence always comes after and what is laid before us is the becoming woman adumbrating the line of flight for every human being.

The transversal dimension of fiction fundamentally counters the principles of the world of attributes. If logos, analytic expression, and rational thought are identified with the male side of bipolar gender, then characteristics, signs and symptoms from menstruality to “a male a l’ aise”, and then pathos, hieroglyphs, ideograms and phonetic writing, they constitute esoteric disposition of the female. Where order has collapsed in states of the world, the viewpoint provides a formula by which art and fiction can constitute and reconstitute a new beginning to the world. Such a beginning is nec-

²⁸ Bryx A., Denosko G., “Deleuze dictionary”, *Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias*.

essarily singularizing; the transversal dimension or the never-viewed viewpoint draws a line of communication through the heterogeneous pieces and fragments that refuse to belong to a whole, that are parts of different wholes, or that have no whole other than style. From a rounding milieu or from an interzone with its contiguous in the middle, they are both unequivocally immanent.

The ephemeral images, memories and signs, the odors, flavours and drafts of particular settings are swept along at various rhythms and velocities in the creation of the non-totalizing transversal dimension of becoming minoritarian - where female stands au lieu of every minority that is not reproductive, imitative or representative, but depends solely on its functioning. For that reason, becoming woman preempts the interaction of human with the post-human, the cyborg, the schizoid the transgressive, the queer, the non-binary.

Deleuze finds third parties that will communicate aberrantly between partial objects of hermaphroditic bodies and plants. The famous apiarian bestiary of Deleuze shows how he always prioritizes the simulacrum, the artifact, "the false". When Luce Irigaray²⁹ speaks for a gender fashioned culturally and socially, she does not mean that it is a trope of the logos, she had been the first to deconstruct all the grammarology of huMAN and has changed once and for all, he too she and it.

Rather, it is a line of passage, a zig-zagging flight or even the narration of involuntary memory, that productively transverses the entities. Transversality is machinic and becoming woman on the horizon of species evolution. The female war machine produces partial objects and resonances between them. Becoming woman can be understood as an essential singularity, which is superior to the partitioned objects, and yet not beyond them. Woman, Gaia Nature can easily be interjected and change place between them.

²⁹ Luce Irigaray is a Belgian feminist, philosopher, linguist, psychoanalyst, and cultural theorist. Who examines the uses and misuses of language in relation to woman

Orientation of gendered body in space and the woman's image in Queer Phenomenology

We will explore the construction of the image of women through the lens of queer phenomenology, drawing, on Sara Ahmed's³⁰ redefinition of orientation, directionality and embodiment. She argues that the image of women, as historically and culturally situated, functions as a site of heteronormative orientation, and queer phenomenology offers a context for critically destabilizing and redefining this image. Through the analysis of visual culture and spatial theory, we will show how images of women are not merely representations, but material forces that are shaped and shaped by the normative lines of desire. The image of women has long been a battleground for ideological, cultural and political investments. From classical image to contemporary advertising and digital media, the female image is not only represented but also oriented - positioned to be seen, consumed and evaluated through dominant gaze. S. Ahmed will write:

Following lines also involves forms of social investment. Such investments “promise” return (if we follow this line, then “this” or “that” will follow), which might sustain the very will to keep going. Though such investments in the promise of return, subjects *reproduce the lines that they follow*.in a way, thinking about the politics of “lifelines” helps us to rethink the relationship between inheritance (the line that we are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line)³¹

Queer phenomenology, as articulated by Sara Ahmed, offers a critical method for examining how bodies and images acquire meaning through the directions in which they are viewed and the spaces they inhabit. We propose that the image of women is not a constant image but a potential, direc-

³⁰ Ahmed S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press 2006.

³¹ Ahmed S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, p.17.

torial phenomenon that participates in the orientation of subjects within heteronormative and patriarchal spatialities.

The Image of Woman as a Site of Orientation

Traditional phenomenology, particularly in the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, emphasizes the intentionality of consciousness and perception. Both consciousness and perception are always of something. This relation between subject and object is not neutral, and in gendered visual culture, it is often mediated by what Laura Mulvey³² calls the “male gaze”. The image of woman, then, is often constructed to follow with male subjectivity, offering a line of sight that sustains heteronormative orientation. S. Ahmed’s queer phenomenology challenges this by asking: what happens when bodies do not follow these lines? In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Ahmed theorizes orientation not only as a spatial but also a social relation—how bodies are “directed” toward certain objects, values, or futures. In Chapter I, S. Ahmed considers “how spatial orientations are shaped by others’ social orientations”³³. The image of woman, in this sense, is an object toward which heteronormative desire is oriented, and which orients viewers in return. The queering of the image of woman, then, does not simply mean a replacement of content but a reorientation of the very structure of perception. Disorientation becomes a critical strategic. Ahmed has showed, the orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodily lines and that queer disorientation returns us to the strangeness of the familiar images of women that disrupt normative cues—through abstraction, performance art, or queer aesthetics—invite disorientation and the possibility of new alignments. Disorientation becomes a critical strategy. Images of women who disrupt normative cues—

³² Mulvey L., “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, *Screen*, 16:3, Autumn 1975, pp. 803-816

³³ Ahmed S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, p.23.

through abstraction, performance art, or queer aesthetics—invite disorientation and the possibility of new alignments.

Consider, for example, the work of artists like Claude Cahun³⁴ or Zanele Muholi³⁵, whose self-representations trouble fixed identities of gender, race, and sexuality. These images resist being “lined up” with normative expectations, instead cultivating ambiguity, multiplicity, and resistance. Such artistic strategies resonate with queer phenomenology’s emphasis on the sideways and the oblique. The image of woman, far from being a neutral representation, is a mechanism of orientation—both produced by and productive of *social* spatiality. Through the lens of queer phenomenology, we can understand this image as a site where bodily directions, habitual alignments, and normative investments converge. By engaging with queer methods of disorientation and re-orientation, we can begin to re-imagine the image of woman not as an endpoint of vision, but as a starting point for new trajectories of thought, desire, and embodiment. The image of woman is not a mere reflection of gender but a powerful structure of orientation, one that organizes vision, desire, and social space. Across time and media—from classical sculpture and Renaissance painting to Instagram selfies and digital cinema—images of women have been repeatedly positioned to align with dominant gazes, often serving as symbols of aesthetic pleasure, reproductive value, or moral virtue. This repetitive alignment is not accidental but deeply political. Visual culture produces the social values. As we have already mentioned above, Laura Mulvey’s foundational essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” claimed that mainstream cinema constructs woman as “to-be-looked-at-ness”³⁶, that is, as “sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups

³⁴ Claude Cahun was a French surrealist photographer, sculptor, and writer in the early of twentieth century. Her work explores gender identity and the unconscious

³⁵ Zanele Muholi is a famous South African artist and visual activist working in video, photography and installation. Her work includes the documentation of lives of South Africa’s Black lesbian, gay, trans, queer and intersex communities.

³⁶ Mulvey L., “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, *Screen*, 16:3, Autumn 1975, p. 808.

to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busdy Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.”³⁷ Thus, the camera’s gaze—often aligned with the male protagonist—invites the spectator to look at women as aesthetic objects, rather than narrative agents.

Queer phenomenology, as developed by Sara Ahmed, provides a critical framework for understanding how such images are not only consumed but also produced through orientations: ways of turning toward or away from certain bodies, spaces, and futures. This paper aims to apply queer phenomenology to visual and spatial representations of womanhood in order to reveal the normative lines that direct perception and bodily experience and to explore the political potential of disorientation as a queer strategy of resistance. They also reinforce a set of habitual orientations: how a body should sit, what it should wear, where it should be placed.

Ahmed’s notion of orientation becomes especially relevant here. To be oriented is to have one’s body directed in a certain way—to face certain possibilities and not others. The image of woman becomes a tool of orientation, one that disciplines not only the gaze but the very direction of bodily being. Girls and women are subtly taught to position themselves in accordance with these images—to “line up” with expected futures.

Disorientation and Queer Image

In the beginning of conclusion of Ahmed’s book writes:

“Moments of disorientation are viral. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable.”³⁸

³⁷ Mulvey L., “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, *Screen*, 16:3, Autumn 1975, p. 808.

³⁸ Ahmed S., *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 157.

In other words, the moments of disorientation produce a potential site of resistance. So, disorientation is the possibility of another direction, as Ahmed has shown us. This act of turning away from the normative path—of refusing to align with dominant gazes—can be found in many queer artistic and cultural practices like in artwork of Claude Cahun which we mentioned above. Often cross-dressed, masked, or ambiguously presented, Cahun subverts the image of woman by resisting both binary gender norms and heteronormative desires. In a similar way the artwork of South African visual activist Zanele Muholi in *Somnyama Nkonyama* uses the black female body as a site of defiant self-representation. Through highly stylized self-portraits, Muholi challenges the power over her image, confronting histories of racial and gender objectification. These artistic interventions demonstrate that images can also be tools of queer phenomenology—means of reorienting perception, disrupting norms, and making visible the social mechanics of alignment.

Conclusions

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers a radically different framework for understanding the body and gender. Rather than being treated as objects of external study or social constructs cut off from experience, they are recognized as embodied ways of being in the world. The philosopher invites us to reflect on our relationship to the body, not as something we have, but as something we are - and therefore to understand gender as an experience, not a given.

In the context of the present study, it is necessary to acknowledge the important contribution of J. Butler in his approach to the study of sexuality through the performative agency of the gendered body. Butler's philosophical framework, which draws on Merleau-Ponty's concept of the phenomenology of the body, offers a unique lens through which we can examine the complex dynamics of human sexuality. The same could be said about S. Ahmed's queer phenomenology and the concept of orientation that she introduces

based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. By combining these phenomenological approaches, we study the issue of the image of women in a dia-phenomenological way, namely by combining the above philosophical positions and linking the image of women with the gendered body, its orientation and its performativity.

Finally, the topology of the body in Deleuze-Guattari is the body without organs as an imaginary image that forms a place of potential expression and freedom and at the same time of passage à l'act to chaos. Here the gendered body is multiple and produces the logic of the situation and at the same time this is produced through its lacks as a "machine of desire". Transversality responds and also highlights the primordial importance of practical and political issues to Guattari's conceptual work. As we will see, Guattari conceived of transversality in relation to the Leninist cut; it is linked thus to democratic centralism and to the subject-group. Transversality is also linked to enunciation and autopoiesis; it is characterized by Guattari as trans-monadic and transitive. The notion of transversality will also be put in relation with the becoming woman for the machinic formation of a war machine against state power That is counted as a characteristic of the Openness of Deleuze and his understanding of an all-inclusive gender emerging from disjunctive choices. Transversality defines a modern way of writing that moves away from the transcendental and dialectical presuppositions of the Platonic model of reminiscence and envisions an immanent and singularizing version instead.

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