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The philosophy of media from the *language of forms* and the representational nature of the subject in the work of Leroi-Gourhan and the phenomenology of language of M. Merleau-Ponty to a phenomenology of the *non-whole*

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Abstract

This article investigates the philosophical foundations of media by re-examining the concepts of form, representation, and embodiment through a phenomenological lens. It begins with André Leroi-Gourhan's notion of the language of forms, emphasizing how technical gestures and symbolic expression evolve together and showing how the externalization of thought into material supports lays the groundwork for the mediation between body and world. This archaeological perspective is then brought into conversation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language, in which expression is understood not simply as a vehicle for representation but as the very process through which meaning emerges within lived, perceptual experience. By tracing the dialogue and tension between these two approaches, the article introduces a phenomenology of mediation—an approach that examines how meaning arises through the interplay between embodied perception and media forms, rather than through fixed representations. Both thinkers, though distinct in their

frameworks, point toward a redefinition of mediation that unsettles the traditional subject-object dichotomy by highlighting the dynamic relationship between bodily activity and symbolic systems. Expanding on these foundations, the article advances the concept of a Phenomenology of the non-whole. This perspective understands media not as totalizing or closed systems of representation, but as open-ended, fragmentary processes that express the inherent incompleteness and relational nature of human experience; in other words, it explores how media articulate the partial, pre-representational structures through which sense is made. By clarifying these concepts, the discussion becomes accessible to readers from diverse backgrounds, fostering deeper engagement with the core arguments.

Keywords: *phenomenology of perception, philosophy of media, aesthetics, gesture, psychoanalysis, language of forms, unconscious*

Introduction

In this article, we will approach media as aesthetics and as a phenomenological consideration of both the "language of forms" (Leroi-Gourhan) and linguistic structure (M. Merleau-Ponty). In *Gesture and Speech*¹, Leroi-Gourhan situates the origin of the human not in rational consciousness but in the technical gesture—the hand's coordination with the tool and the face's coordination with speech. The language of forms thus designates a profound interdependence between manual activity and symbolic expression. From this standpoint, each tool created, image generated, and inscription rendered is not merely the product of physical action but also represents a symbolic aspect. Each of these material artifacts serves simultaneously as an action—rooted in the intentional gestures of the body—and as a sign, inscribed with meaning that transcends its immediate practical use. Consequently, the processes of creating and employing tools are never purely functional. Rather than simply serving utilitarian roles, rituals are imbued with symbolic gestures—such as a handshake or the exchange of wedding rings—that signify intentions, relationships, and meanings extending far beyond their practical functions. The act of making or using a tool encapsulates both the tangible

¹ This is the two-volume work *The Gesture and Speech of Man*, vol. 2, *Memory and Rhythms*. For the French edition: *Le geste et la parole*, vol. II, *La mémoire et les rythmes*, Paris 1964.

manipulation of materials and the transmission of meaning, binding the corporeal and the representational in a unified field of sense. Thus, the language of forms reveals how humans, through technical and artistic practices, continuously mediate and signify their relationship with the world around them. Every manual act—whether the making of an object, the tracing of an inscription, or the shaping of an image—not only expresses and externalizes thought but also serves as an embodiment of cultural and personal meaning. For example, when a potter shapes clay, the resulting vessel is more than a utilitarian item; it reflects the potter’s cultural heritage, individual intention, and aesthetic choices, transforming the craft into a form of communication that extends beyond the physical object. Similarly, ancient artisans who carved petroglyphs on cave walls or inscribed tablets were not merely recording information—they were participating in ritual practices, imparting collective memory, and symbolizing beliefs central to their communities. Such acts are inseparable from their symbolic dimension, with the tool or form acting as a material support for meaning and communication across diverse cultures and historical periods. By considering these examples, we see how manual acts have continually functioned as vehicles for thought and meaning, inviting reflection on the rich interplay between creation, symbolism, and human experience in every era. This duality—referring to the interplay between physical actions (the manual, such as toolmaking or gesture) and symbolic thought (the use of language or ritual)—forms the foundation for the development of both technical and artistic practices. It demonstrates how bodily activity and symbolic expression co-evolve to mediate and shape the relationship between the individual, their environment, and the creation of meaning. For Leroi-Gourhan, exteriorization—meaning the process by which internal thought is projected outward through material supports like tools, images, or language—is not merely an additional aspect of cognition but is instead a fundamental condition that makes thought possible in the first place. For example, the invention of early tools or the emergence of spoken language illustrates how human beings externalize internal ideas, thereby transforming both their own capacities and their interaction with the world. This perspective resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s notion that expression is not a passive vehicle for meaning but the very act through which meaning comes into being, further emphasizing the depth and

philosophical significance of Leroi-Gourhan's theory. From this perspective, media are not neutral carriers of information but the historical crystallization of bodily and cognitive rhythms. The evolution of technical forms—engraving, writing, photography, digital interfaces—marks a shift in the balance between memory, perception, and expression. The “representational” nature of media, then, must be understood as a structural displacement: each new medium redefines what counts as presence, absence, and representation itself. We will also propose a phenomenology of “non-whole” to study a philosophy of media in relation to the perceptible and the unconscious, considering that structural discontinuity or non-linearity is the true attribute of the human experience of perceiving realities by the subject. By examining the shift from “functional aesthetics”—where artistic forms originally served practical, utilitarian roles—to a focus on aesthetics for their own sake, centered on beauty and expression, and by considering the uniquely human ability to create representations (such as images, symbols, or language), we seek to clarify how the medium itself becomes a metonymy, or a concrete embodiment, of artistic action. In other words, the medium is not simply a passive channel but actively participates in artistic creation, expressing the interplay between function, representation, and meaning. This perspective makes explicit how the evolution from practical use to aesthetic contemplation, combined with our linguistic and representational capacities, underscores the logic of the medium as an essential component of artistic practice. Essentially, we redefine McLuhan's axiom: “the medium is the message” with the axiom: “the medium is the signifier.” The performative process of language and of creative action with any medium is nothing more than processes that concern the way signifiers are articulated and their arbitrary relationship with signifieds, so that the subject can grasp the phenomena of the world in which “appears and is simultaneously revealed to him”, following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. At the same time, that which cannot be said but is present as such through the act of creation belongs to the “language of forms.” Therefore, every means of such an act is contained within it as the subject's ability to perceive phenomena with a dual intentionality. That of consciousness and that of the Freudian unconscious, which jointly shape the image that the subject constructs of the world. An image whose origin belongs to the Lacanian “mirror stage.”

Leroi-Gourhan's philosophical anthropology, as articulated in his famous work "Le geste et la parole», concerns a phenomenology of the human capacity to symbolize the world around us using our "representational capacity". Leroi-Gourhan's paleontology, starting from various zoological groups in comparison with human evolution and the pre-linguistic period, extends to the emergence of speech. In other words, it covers the emergence of the speaking subject who, alongside the construction of tools and the gradual symbolization of objects, produces meanings, names things, and enters into the linguistic phenomenon. All these evolutionary dynamics co-shape a multiple experience of the conscious world, while the archaic unconscious is transformed into an unconscious "structured like a language," to quote Lacan. Now the realities it perceives are contained in spoken language and subjectifies, while at the same time the representation of the world through the objects it constructs, the rhythm of movement, singing, shape the "language of forms." It therefore appears that the paleontology of language, together with the phenomenon of the representation of the world as a variable image of the subject through the "language of forms," lead to a "functional aesthetic" which, with social evolution and social bonds, "give birth" to the phenomenon of art and the aesthetic experience beyond visual perception. Specifically, in the sixth chapter of the first volume², which examines "the ability of the prudent man to express thought in symbols," a fact that is emphasized even in the structure of the most archaic rituals. The power of the symbol coexists with the symbolism of linguistic structure. It is not only the "tool" or technique but also the ritual that evolves the human animal. After all, Lacan states explicitly: "the symbol makes man"³.

Leroi-Gourhan's position is isomorphic to that of the American thinker Mumford, who refers to the duality of tools and rituals in his work "The Myth of the Machine." As does Wittgenstein's axiom⁴ that "Man is generally a ritualistic being"⁵.

² Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole, vol.I, La technique et la language, trans.*, A. Elefantis, ed. M.I.E.T, Athens 2000.

³ Lacan J., *Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1966.

⁴ Wittgenstein L., *language, magic, ritual*, trans. K.Kovaios, ed. Kardamitsa.

⁵ Wittgenstein L., *language, magic, ritual*, trans. K.Kovaios, ed. Kardamitsa.

The French thinker-anthropologist's position is based on a critique of the Marxist doctrine of tool/instrumentalization as man's dominant capacity in relation to the natural environment. The human imposes itself on the natural through the evolutionary dynamics of the construction of tools. Leroi-Gourhan studies the first social groups in which the dynamics of symbols appear in burial and other customs based on a pre-aesthetic experience or a "functional aesthetic" as mentioned above. The consequence of this is:

"human animals to materialize their relationship with each other and with the world of objects that appear in their consciousness. At the same time, they will be classified by names, attributing semantic values to things by abstracting them from their primary function and following the dual representation-symbolization process, with the result that they are now inscribed in the symbolic order of language"⁶.

At this point, we would like to emphasize that the vehicle of his representational capacity outside of man is his body. Both in its biological essence and in its symbolic and imaginary essence. Therefore, the main means of "representing the world" is the body and, consequently, its physicality, so that it can experience space and time as transformations of its imaginary physical image (Mirror Stage)⁷ As a subject of consciousness and the unconscious.

These are essentially transformations that are morphological in nature, since humans, using their three representational dimensions, construct their environment representatively and at the same time inscribe this construction into the symbolic order, activating what Leroi-Gourhan as "symbolic thought."⁸

⁶ Mitrou Y., *Phenomenology of the Unconscious*, Thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH)-Paris 8, 2017. Cf. Castro, P. A., "The Forgotten View of the Origin of Language: The Legacy of Herder's Philosophy". *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10: 1, 2025, pp. 73-85, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.37087>.

⁷ Reference to Lacan's radical study on human development until the completion of two years stage, when the concept of the imaginary image of the body appears. It was first presented at the IPA conference in 1936 and evolved during his research on Freudian psychoanalysis.

⁸ Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole, vol.I, La technique et la language*, trans., A. Elefantis, ed. M.I.E.T, Athens 2000.

These are essentially operators that transform the biological from the physical to the human, shaping the uniquely human characteristic of "symbolic thinking." So, whether it is a linguistic phenomenon or the "language of forms," the subject desires to communicate with the Other and others to construct his ego through his imaginary identity.

The aesthetic experience of sight and body: the abstract logic of the origins of art

Our reference to the way of "representing the world" and especially our body introduces us to M. Merleau-Ponty's *propres corps*, as defined in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as to the gaze as a dialectic of "the eye and the spirit." At the same time, physicality in aesthetic experience denotes an articulation of kinesthetic and visual perception that shapes the aesthetic perception of the subject in relation to the objects it constructs or the murals it creates in caves (Lasko) since the Upper Paleolithic period. Our position is that the characteristics that shape aesthetic perception are uniform throughout the centuries, from the Upper Paleolithic to contemporary art in the digital and post-digital era. Their different manifestations concern the choice of media that function as signifiers that arbitrarily produce signifiers that interpret aesthetic qualities. Let us consider the cave with the murals as an "art gallery" where, together with the fire that the group maintains inside us, the murals of the bison hunt are revealed, while a song and a repetitive physical choreography capture the same theme as the painted representation. The *idio-gazes* meet, and the *idio-bodies* move in rhythmic patterns. All this produces the conditions for a multiplicity of sensory experience, or, in terms of contemporary art, the viewer's gaze is that of the actor interacting with the "visual gesture." Leroi-Gourhan refers to the abstract nature of archaic representation, of archaic creation. He uses as an example the Australian *churinga*, whose abstract motifs "depict the body of the mythical ancestor or the places where his myths unfolded." Leroi-Gourhan refers to the abstract nature of archaic representation, of

archaic creation. He uses as an example the Australian churinga⁹, whose abstract motifs "depict the body of the mythical ancestor or the places where his myths unfolded." He also discerns a representation of verbal mobility and rhythm, perhaps of the priest reciting the "magic words," activating for Leroi-Gourhan the two forms of expression: rhythmic-verbal mobility and graphic representation. Adding mobility to space, we arrive at a kinesthetic experience in relation to the perception of the general setting that involves the natural and the human. This is a prime example of interaction with an installation with such intentionality. This interaction, as in synchrony, shapes a different perception of the object, while an image emerges that is activated by the imaginary image of the body. It is the "birth" of form in the work of art, long before it appears as such, both as a shape and as a form. As Dolto said, the human shape is common to every human being, while the imaginary image relating to the unconscious is connected to each subject uniquely. Therefore, the intermediacy that governs art, especially today, even that which concerns the aesthetics of simulation, is determined by the trans-bodily¹⁰ of objects and subjects within any artistic practice.

The origins of art are therefore recorded as a highly abstract experience due to the archaic symbolic processes that constitute a primary aesthetic experience, which begins with its functional value and later, through the "language of forms," is transformed into aesthetic subjectivity. We could say that the "paleontology of language" in Leroi-Gourhan's work defines a "paleontology of aesthetics" where the phenomenon of art in its etymological reference belongs to the abstract.

The representational tendency with its realistic intention, which is reemerging today with the aesthetics of digital media, constitutes a fusion with the imitation of reality and differs from the aesthetic

⁹ Wooden or stone objects from central Australia, engraved with symbols. They are considered sacred by various Aboriginal tribes.

¹⁰ Mitrou Y., "The Art of Performance and the Condition of Intermediality in Public Space", article from the *proceedings of the Scientific Symposium: A scoping meeting Performance*. Cf. Mitrou, Y., and C. T. Kolyri. "Philosophical Interpretations of the Image of Women as Performative Act of Gendered Body and As Bodily Orientation in space: M. Merleau-Ponty - J. Buttler - S. Ahmed - Deleuze". *Dia-noesis*, 17, 2025, pp. 131-52, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41708>.

experience of the abstract, which more actively intersects with the symbolic. What, then, would an aesthetics of the media mean beyond a logic of the aesthetic through the signifier and its arbitrary interpretation? Our position is that phenomenology itself constitutes a radical experience of the aesthetic, which is represented as a transformative space-time structure in the subject, both in his perception and in his unconscious.

Towards a psychoanalytic approach to aesthetics within media philosophy and the phenomenology of the "non-whole"

Leroi-Gourhan demonstrated that the evolutionary process from hominids to humans concerned motor sets. Both those belonging to the expressive whole of the face, which lead to the production of sound sets, and those belonging to the kinesthetic capacity of the human animal. Thus, humans gradually enter the symbolic order, starting from a sound-synthesizing articulation that verbalizes the thing in a way until it is rooted in the polysemy of the meaning of verbal representation and in the necessity of recording their experience in the world to which they belong. From the moment the primary social structure classifies verbal sets so that its members can communicate, an archaic type of speech begins to emerge, still far from the power of rhetoric. The objects are still related to the immediacy of human physical experience, while representational practices as gestural realizations are determined by a "wild Being (*Être sauvage*)" as mentioned by M. Merleau-Ponty. The ritual structure, which was also used by Neanderthals in burial customs, indicating a developed social structure and the ability to communicate with sound sets and therefore verbal representations, determines the way in which the symbol, as an abstract gesture, depicts the visible world but also visualizes the invisible or that which is not immediately perceptible. Sensory experience is not only a set of biological factors that define audiovisual perception but is also mediated by the use of various means that, either as tools (utilitarian function) or as objects of the "language of forms," shape subjectivity. The "transition" to graphic representations and the naming of things "alienates" verbal representations and develops language so that organized speech is produced and the thing is distanced from the verbal representation that will

gradually become the word for the thing. We thus gradually move on to speech and then to writing, where the verbal or logothetic practices¹¹ of power, as Foucault understands them, now appear. On the other hand, Lacanian psychoanalysis identifies four types of discourse that constitute the social bond, starting with the discourse of the master, based on a variation of the well-known Hegelian dichotomy of master and slave in the realm of enjoyment (jouissance)¹². The physical experience, which M. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes throughout his phenomenology as being "rooted in the world where man dwells," because it contains something strictly archaic, along with what is perceived as such, is now established in language. The unconscious is «articulated as language»¹³ from the moment the subject is born within its structure and is constituted as a speaking-being (parlêtre). This is how desire (désir) and its complex path, which is overlaid by demand (demande), are formed, remaining rooted in the mental structure of the unconscious. Neurosis defines the subject's lack¹⁴ and determines the nature of the symptom. We are now entering what we call culture. So, the dominant discourse appears not as a humanistic transcription of "crystal-clear" human thought but because of the practices of power through discursive practices. Nowadays, in addition to the dominant discourse, we have the authoritarian practice of the dominant image. The combination of the two creates a logocentric and visual culture within a patriarchal type of knowledge, consistent with capitalism. Even the acceptance of gender fluidity is recognized through the "filtering" of this type of knowledge. Femininities and other genders can potentially define another articulation of the transfer of knowledge through contemporary orality, through artistic practices that escape the dominant image and ultimately through their radical rupture with the universal of meaning, inscribing themselves in a phenomenology of the "non-

¹¹ Reference to Foucault's work in which the subject is shaped by structures of power. Such power includes verbal or discursive practices.

¹² Reference to the fundamental concept of psychoanalysis in the Lacanian field.

¹³ Reference to the fundamental concept of psychoanalysis in the Lacanian field.

¹⁴ The subject of the unconscious, according to Lacanian theory, is structurally deficient. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, being is defined as Being-in-deficiency (manque-à-Être).

whole"¹⁵. So that they can reconnect with their physical roots, producing an aesthetic of the media because of the above phenomenology, to connect with the "not-all" of a world that is not limited to the arbitrariness of meaning but is recorded through the «processes of events»¹⁶ to activate truths. It is a connection of phenomenology and therefore of the aesthetics of the media with the unconscious, starting from the fundamental image, that which concerns the creation of the imaginary through the imaginary union of the "fragmented body"¹⁷. Liberation comes precisely through the "terrifying view" of reality, of bodily fragmentation and the finitude of existence, with the intention of reunification recorded as a radical experience that is repeated and reminiscent of the pleasure of Camus's Sisyphus, which cannot be justified or conceptually completed precisely because it is inscribed in the "not-all." So that they can reconnect with their physical roots, producing an aesthetic of the media as a consequence of the above phenomenology to connect with the "not-all" of a world that is not limited to the arbitrariness of meaning but is recorded through the processes of events to activate truths. This is a connection between phenomenology and, therefore, the aesthetics of the media with the unconscious, starting from the fundamental image, that which concerns the creation of the imaginary through the imaginary union of the "fragmented body." Liberation comes precisely through the "terrifying view" of reality, of physical fragmentation and the finitude of existence, with the intention of reunification recorded as a radical experience that is repeated and reminiscent of the pleasure of Camus' Sisyphus, which cannot be justified or conceptually completed precisely because it is written off as "not-all." Already in a post-humanist world where scientific and technological

¹⁵ We borrow the concept of "non-whole" from Lacan's 20th Seminar, *Encore*, in which he refers to the non-whole Woman in contrast to the totalizing and confining reality of man as a gender position. We consider that femininities as such, as well as fluid gender positions, are inscribed in the condition of the "not-all," within which they escape the domination of meaning and the logics it produces. Thus, they escape the dominant patriarchal discourse. Cf. Sakizli, A., "The Neutrality of Dasein and the Shame in the Female Experience: A Feminist Philosophical Analysis", *Dia-noesis*, 17, June 2025, pp. 313-30, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41716>.

¹⁶ Reference to the Event according to Alain Badiou as recorded in his seminal work, *L'être et l'événement*.

¹⁷ Reference to Lacan's "mirror stage".

supremacy promises a whole structured on the control of pleasure with the image of the post-human -human being trapped in the infinite set of information and digital representations, the political as aesthetic constitutes the direction for a capable resistance against bioterrorism, part of the new biopolitics that aims to control pleasure. And thus, also towards the control of a cultural policy that constructs media aesthetics that deactivate the non-linear and exclude the relationship with the "non-whole." Since the dawn of digital dominance, Bishop has referred to the eclipse of politics by the aesthetics of new media, while also referring to «the non-uni-directional mediation of social relations by media images»¹⁸. He raises the question of what the aesthetic object can be in the era of Web 2.0, if communication between users can itself be an aesthetic object. At the dawn of the digital age, with the normalization of user-media relations by the rules set by the Web 2.0 protocol (2002), a "useful art" emerges, based on the interactive relationship with the medium. After all, the medium as signifier, here as signifier of freedom of choice of information, determines its aesthetics and objects. At the dawn of the digital age, with the normalization of user-media relations by the rules set by the Web 2.0 protocol (2002), a "useful art" emerged, based on the interactive relationship with the medium. After all, the medium as signifier, here as signifier of freedom of choice of information, determines its aesthetics and objects. Now, in the post-digital era, the contradiction arises from the dominant power structure itself, precisely through the condition of exclusion. Web 3.0 advances through the promise of unlimited possibilities in the construction of virtual reality, reaching GPT4 with "folded" self-evolving algorithms that accumulate everything from information and transform it into an "image of knowledge." That is, an image where the signifier-medium shapes an imaginary of the possibility of producing valid knowledge through the appropriate selection of information. A phenomenology of the intermediate (M. Merleau-Ponty) records here the loss of the intermediate of the "flesh" (chair) within the eclipsing physicality of the subject. The aesthetics of the medium here concerns the aesthetics of completeness and the processes of achieving it through the continuous readjustment of information

¹⁸ Bishop Cl., *Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media*, ART-FORUM 2012.

and the relationship of use with the algorithm. The communicative logic defined by M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language at the symposium of '56, through the prioritization of social relations over verbal meaning as well as the embodied experience of the linguistic phenomenon, is replaced by the capable combination of information in order to form a plausible relationship of communication with the user.

The change in paradigm from the early digital era to its later version in terms of aesthetic object reveals the need for a philosophy of both a theoretical and practical nature that will take a critical and open stance on the issue, essentially developing a new phenomenological approach as well as an active connection with psychoanalytic experience and knowledge. Art as a phenomenon and the aesthetics of the media are called upon, through eventful processes (poetic events), to activate philosophy in terms of truths and to inscribe themselves in the tropic of "non-whole" that contains non-meaning and lack as structural elements of the human and post-human condition. This is to avoid its fusion with a constructed necessity of a universal morality that sidelines the political as aesthetic and vice versa. After all, the failure of the humanistic vision and of high thought and art highlights the truth of the impossibility of universalities that objectify the arbitrary meaning of the world. There is no "pure" thought, uncontaminated by the unconscious, that can reassure us, nor is there a universal algorithm that will save us from our subjectivity and the discontinuity of a world that we never cease to appear in and that appears to us at every moment.

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Philosophical Notes





Leo Strauss and Islamic Political Thought

Rasoul Namazi