



THE MATERIALITY OF EXPERIENCE. PHENOMENOLOGY BETWEEN PHAINOLOGY AND PHENOMENISM

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I consider the materiality of experience as stemming from a temporal process of sense-formation (*Sinnbildung*), whose essence is not just formally configured, but also materially organized. In order to understand this process of sense-formation, I first examine the materiality that is intrinsic to the intentional sense and its relationship with the sensible materiality of experience brought forth by the project of hyletic phenomenology. In the second part of the paper, I propose to overcome the tension between a materiality of sense and a materiality of sensibility by reflecting on the specific materiality that is created in our experience through the dynamism of imaginative modifications. Allowing us to switch between different temporal and spatial horizons, imaginative projections and reveries reveal a hidden “reverse” side of our perceptive field, that we access only when we let go of objectifying acts and established significance. In the last part of the paper, I turn toward bodily gestures, in which I see an expression of experience that resists objectification and straightforward symbolization, attesting for the complex social inscription of our bodily existence. I end the paper with an inquiry into the specific materiality of gestures, understanding them as vanishing archives offered to the future.

Keywords: Materiality; Hyletic Phenomenology; Sense; Imagination; Gesture.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the first articulations of its method, the phenomenological research has been tasked to make visible, analyze, and transform the materiality of our experience. When we assign to phenomenology the mission of narrowing down the field of knowledge to first person experience, so it can be re-grounded in the effectivity of a shared lifeworld, or when we think about phenomenological description as a way to gain an intuitive insight into the depths of the process of sense-constitution and sense-formation, we count on a materiality of lived experience that is disclosed and organized by the various methodological turns of the phenomenological project. As a paradigmatic example of such a methodological turn, the phenomenological reduction, in its various iterations, aims to liberate a view on experience that cannot be reduced to a mere abstraction, making it “materially” accessible to us in a novel way. Another significant example is the eidetic variation that crystalizes constellations of phenomenological essences which organize the field of possible experience, forging “material” paths for its effective realization. In a more practical vein, the ethical and historical dimensions of concrete experience have been explored – from Husserl to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and further on, to Levinas and Ricoeur – in order to defend the necessity of a material foundation of human freedom that opens it to responsibility and solidarity.

However, as we can see in each of these examples, the materiality of experience encapsulates different dimensions – indicating each time an element of experience that is directly engaging, effective, or socially grounded – which means that it can probably be approached in various ways. Besides the plural meanings of what is materially present in our experience, another problem to highlight is related to its provenance. While it is not easy to determine how much of the materiality orienting the phenomenological description is present in human experience before any intellectual symbolization, and how much of it is produced by the phenomenological approach itself, it is important to question its nature, its genesis and its formation. What does it mean for our experience to have its specific materiality? How is this materiality constituted and how does it weigh on the sense we can make of what we live? If there is a phenomenological materiality distinct from other types of materiality, such as the ones supporting the existence of the world, or the historical processes whose legacy we carry, what is its status and function? More specifically, does phenomenological materiality belong to a sort of an invisible substance of experience itself, providing the basis

for a yet another fundamental ontology, or is its function rather social, realizing itself through the political visibility of our interactions?

In this paper, I aim to show how the materiality of experience brought to light by the phenomenological method is related to a process of progressive unfolding of the sense of what we live. I first examine the connection between materiality and intentional sense established as early as 1901, in Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, and contrast it with the sensible materiality exhibited by the project of hyletic phenomenology sketched in the first volume of the *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology*. In the second part of the paper, I propose to overcome the tension between a materiality of sense and a materiality of sensibility by reflecting on the specific materiality produced in our experience by imaginative modifications. Rather than orienting us toward the mere intentional component of consciousness or toward its sensuous matter, imagination allows us to switch between temporal and spatial horizons, instilling our perceptive field with colors and tonalities that modify the texture of its appearance. In the last part of the paper, I turn toward the relationship between imagination and gestures, seeing in the latter an expression of experience that resists straightforward symbolization and objectified significance. Making manifest the complex antagonism at work in the social inscription of our bodily existence, the life of our gestures seems to share something of our phantasy-life, while being also shaped by the historical sedimentation of our bodily interactions. I close with an inquiry into the specific materiality of gestures, understanding them as vanishing archives of past experiences offered to the future.

1. THE MATERIALITY OF SENSE AND SENSATION

The first important attempt to examine the materiality of experience that is revealed by phenomenological analysis can be found in Edmund Husserl's fifth *Logical Investigation*, when the sense (*Sinn*) of intentional acts is presented as a "matter" that has to be distinguished from their mere formal quality. Matter is here defined as

that element in an act which first gives it reference to an object, and reference so wholly definite that it not merely fixes the object meant in a general way, but also the precise way in which it is meant. The matter – to carry clearness a little further – is that peculiar side of an act's phenomenological content that not only determines *that* it grasps the object but also *as what* it grasps it, the properties, relations, categorial forms, that it itself attributes to it. It is the act's matter that makes its object count as this object and no other, it is the objective, the interpretative sense (*Sinn der gegenständlichen Auffassung, Auffassungssinn*) which serves as basis for the act's quality (Husserl 2011 [1900], V, §20, 121-122).

Even if, at this stage of his work, Husserl does not yet make a clear distinction between sense (*Sinn*) on the one hand and meaning or significance (*Bedeutung*) on the other hand, the intentional materiality uncovered by his analysis should not be understood as a conceptual meaning proper, but rather as a structure of liaison allowing us to apprehend an object as such. The “as” structure of sense (*als Struktur des Sinnes*) is the first milestone into discovering the realm of a hidden materiality of experience that comes to existence only when it is scrutinized through a phenomenological lens. In the fifth *Logical Investigation*, the status of this intentional sense will be clarified with the help of the concept of apperception, understood as “the act-character which as it were ensouls sense and is in essence such as to make us perceive this or that object, see this tree: e.g., hear this ringing, smell this scent of flowers” (*Ibid.*, V, §14, 105), i.e. which can be interpreted as a specific excess of consciousness onto raw sensation. When we hear the sound of a bell or smell a rose, Husserl explains, we do not rely only on the mere auditive and olfactive sensations to detect it, but also on an invisible surplus (*Ueberschüss*) of sense that shapes our apprehension of what we hear or smell (*Ibid.*). Without the hidden matter of intentional sense that allows us to apprehend objects as such, we would have a manifold of mere sensations that could not be united and identified as belonging to an object. Nor would the object be recognized as the unity to which our sensations are tied. As Husserl clearly states, the surplus of consciousness that allows for their intentional synthesis is also responsible for the repeatability of their objective identification.

Hereafter, the primitive level of raw sensibility will provide the second kind of materiality further examined by Husserlian phenomenology. Olfactory and auditory sensations are examples of a sensible layer of intentionality that is to be explored for itself, next to the layer of phantasms that support imaginative acts. The study of sensations and phantasms as core affective data in Husserl’s analysis of time-consciousness and in the first volume of *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology* thus opens the path of a “hyletic” phenomenology, which Husserl opposes to the initial formal outline of intentional analysis, exclusively concerned with the noetico-noematic sense-givenness (*Sinngebung*). Properly speaking, these sensible “aspects”, understood as partial sketches or adumbrations (*Abschattungen*), are not intentional, as they belong to the rough fabric (*Stoff*) of experience that must be shaped by intentional sense. Henceforth, they will be depicted by Husserl either as a presentative content (*Gehalt*) that is not yet totally formed or as a phenomenological residue (Husserl 2014 [1977], §85).

When he revisits the problem of the hyletic stratum of intentionality in his 1925 lessons on phenomenological psychology, Husserl describes it as “a fundamental structure in mere subjectivity” (Husserl 1977 [1962], §31, 128) whose immanent disclosure needs to be worked out. In Husserl’s later texts, the hyletic component of phenomenology receives further clarifications (see Husserl 2022)

that connect it to the problem of a phenomenological unconscious (see Gyemant and Popa 2015). However, the true development of the project of hyletic phenomenology is to be found in Michel Henry's project of a "material phenomenology" (Henry 2008 [1990]), which explicitly seeks to liberate the sensible stratum of experience from its relationship to noetic intentionality in order to reveal its purely affective core. For Henry, the sensible matter is ultimately auto-affective, being forced into appearance by intentional acts that distort its true essence. The primitive materiality of phenomenality is therefore nothing else than life constantly affecting itself in a singularity, providing experience with its reality (Henry 1973 [1963], §35). Radicalizing the transcendental turn, which for Husserl had separated the absolute being of consciousness from the contingent being of the world (Husserl 2014 [1977], §49), Henry identifies the materiality of self-affectation as the unifying principle following which "phenomenality arrives at effectiveness" (Henry 1973 [1963], §34, 264). Yet, this attempt to ground phenomenology in a self-affective and affected materiality paradoxically disconnects immanent effectivity from transcendent projections, rendering the latter unreal, as if they were destined to artificially divert the self-effectivity of our sensibility. Hetero-affectivity thus departs from the auto-affectivity that is meant to support it, signaling the danger of an ever-alienating fragmentation haunting human expression (see Henry 2012 [1987]; see also Popa 2012b).

Is it possible to grasp the material concreteness of experience at the level of a pure immanence liberated from all transcendence? In his paper "The Sense of the Sensible" published in 2014, Bruce Bégout elaborates on this question by characterizing Henry's material phenomenology as a "phainology" (Bégout 2004). What does this mean? Given the fact that its aim is not to reflect on the status of phenomena as such, but rather to reveal the immanent effectivity of their appearing (captured by the Greek *phaino*), Henry's philosophical project should be understood as a "phainology" whose purposes are distinct from those pursued through the means of the phenomenological description. More precisely, phainology is the result of a process of narrowing down the spectrum of classical phenomenological investigation. For example, in a reality ruled exclusively by the struggle of auto-affectivity, the differentiation of various experiences relies solely on factors of intensity, shadowing other dimensions of their expression, with their multiple degrees and nuances. Moreover, the reality found by Henry's phainology is circumscribed by the immediate effectivity of a singular sensibility, which seems to be always oriented toward a tense fusion with oneself rather than toward a differentiated experience with others which evolves historically and develops new possibilities to experience its freedom. In the materiality of auto-affectation, experience does not seem to be able to sediment itself and depart critically from itself, the very model of reflexivity being reduced to an essential self-embrace (*étreinte de soi*). While a new principle of force is introduced here

in order to organize the sense of experience (Jean 2015), its level of contingent expression, with its unforeseeable adventures and its discoveries, seems to be lost.

2. THE MATERIALITY OF IMAGINATION

When he reconsiders hyletic phenomenology as a project of “material phenomenology”, Michel Henry clearly separates its domain from the domain of worldly appearances and historical objectifications. Yet it is unclear how a life that withdraws from its worldly expressions can develop a true knowledge of itself and of its effective possibilities. From a theological perspective, such a life appears to be forever safe, in the sense that it never exposes itself to any risk, and therefore “nothing can be learned, nothing can happen” (Chrétien 1988: 44). This second critique of Henry’s project can also be articulated from the standpoint of a phenomenological examination of the genesis of forms of life that shows that life’s specific forms are necessary expressions of its immanent movement, and that they cannot be dissociated from its effectivity. Following Giorgio Agamben’s famous analysis, one can thus argue that the forms-of-life are only separated from life itself in order to dismiss it and to dehumanize it, through a political operation that results in an unsustainable bare life (*nuda vita*) (Agamben 1998 [1995]; 2016 [2014]). Following here the German sense of *Bildung* – genesis of forms and images –, further reflection on the always specific formation of the sense of one’s life is required in order to elucidate the contradiction of a life that is supposed to embrace itself as a pure inner incandescence deprived of exteriority, which no appearance can capture or empower as such. In this section, I will approach the process of this life-formation by focusing on the status of appearances themselves and on the materiality of the imagination that produces and cultivates them (see also Popa 2012a).

When Husserl compares imagination and perception, he notices that while the latter *presents* an object, the former only *presentifies* it indirectly, with the help of the intuitive support of an appearance, through the medium of which an absence becomes present. This indirect presentification (*Vergegewartigung*) is not easy to analyze phenomenologically, as several types of intentional acts participate in it, intertwined and nevertheless distinct from each other. These acts not only differ, but are also in a conflict with each other, as if each of them operated in a direction of experience that excludes the others. Therefore, as Eugen Fink has shown in his famous 1930 text “Presentification and Image”, imagination should not only be understood as a presentification (*Vergegewartigung*) but also as a de-presentation (*Entgegewartigung*) that alters the robustness of our perceptive presentations. It is important to note here that de-presentation is a

character that belongs not only to imagination, being rather a “temporalizing modality of the original temporalization itself” (*Zeitigungsweise der ursprünglichen Zeitlichkeit selbst*) (Fink 1966 [1930]: 24). At work in the transitional realm of retentions and protentions discovered by Husserl, that constantly enlarges the present toward the past and the future, de-presentation diverts the intentional sense from its objectifying orientation, connecting it horizontally to past and future moments of sense-constitution. The de-presentation of imagination thus seems to participate in a larger unconscious “latent being” of our conscious life, formed by sedimented experiences that resonate with each other (see Geniusas 2020), thus designing the material condition of possibility for all objectivity of experience, be it presented or re-presented (see Fink 1966 [1930], 25).

Returning now to Husserl’s descriptions of imaginative experiences, the first element to notice is that the materiality of imagination is discrete and fading. Made rather of “restlessly changing grey than colors”, imaginative appearances are nevertheless responsible for establishing a connection between distinct temporal and spatial horizons:

We can describe the image object belonging to phantasy, as when we say, for example: I am now remembering the botanical garden as it was in summertime — trees rustling noisily, flowers blooming, slopes shaded. The colors, however, may not come to me. It is more the plastic forms that I find, more a restlessly changing grey than the colors, and so on. Here we focus our attention on the appearance itself and compare its content with the intended subject. Hence the phenomenon of normal phantasy presentation and the phenomenon of presentation directed toward phantasy objects, toward image objects of whatever sort, are obviously different. To take another example, in reading a travel book the situation is clearly different depending on whether we live in the phantasy consciousness as a consciousness that intuitively re-presents foreign lands or, perhaps diverted by a psychological-descriptive interest, turn our interest and act of meaning toward the phantasy images themselves. The apprehensional basis can be precisely the same in both cases. The same image objects appear, and <these> are the basis for the same relation to the distant lands. In the one case, however, it is the image objects that are meant and are the focus of interest; in the other case, it is the distant lands. (Husserl 2005 [1980], nr. 1, § 18, 42)

Despite its striking sensuous poverty, the materiality of the appearance that supports imaginative apprehension is able to connect different levels of experience – present and past, close and distant – and allow us not only to focus on one of them, but also to move from one to another. The transition from one mode of apprehension to the other is sometimes so smooth that we are not even aware of their distinction. Husserl interprets this oscillation in terms of a conflict at work

within the image itself, creating “fair effects” that he opposes to the “aesthetic effects” obtained when we focus exclusively on imaginative apprehensions. But he also sees it as part of a larger conflict between the world of perception and the world of phantasy, since these worlds exclude each other while being at the same interlocked in moments of “perceptive phantasy”. The example of persistent optical illusions and other tricks of the eye is useful here in order to understand how illusory deception persists in our perceptive world and how it is dissolved when we apprehend them as imaginations:

The frequently mentioned deceptions à la the waxworks, the panorama, and so on, show that the transformation of an image phenomenon through the ceasing of the imaginative function allows an ordinary perceptual apprehension to come forth, perhaps even a full perception furnished with normal belief. It may be that at first we see the mannequins as human beings. We then have a normal perception, even if it subsequently proves to be mistaken. If we suddenly become conscious of the deception, image consciousness makes its appearance. But image consciousness does not succeed in lasting in such cases. With its real clothes, hair, and so on, indeed, even with movements artificially mimicked by means of mechanical devices, the wax figure so closely resembles the natural human being that the perceptual consciousness momentarily prevails again and again. The imaginative apprehension is suppressed. We indeed “know” that it is a semblance, but we cannot help ourselves — we see a human being. (*Ibid.*, nr. 1, § 19, 43-44)

I would like to argue that the conflict between imagination and perception is a material one, in the sense that it activates distinct feelings and degrees of attention, and more importantly, different layers of temporal sedimentation. Moreover, the switch from one intentional mode to the other produces a specific materiality, which is introduced by the modification that is proper to the imaginative acts. It is thus interesting to note that our knowledge of a tricky or illusory situation does not weigh enough to help us seize its reality. Rather, knowing that we are under the spell of an illusion, we passively slip back to it, thus prolonging its playful effect. However, the illusion can only persist inasmuch as we perceive it – if we switch to the imaginative mode, we are not deceived by it anymore. Similar oscillations happen in daydreaming and other intermediary states of mind, as for example when we wake up from a dream or we fall asleep. On the background of a state of absorption that is the most complete when we dream, the world of perception is “almost swallowed up” as we slip toward the world of phantasy:

Sometimes we give ourselves up to the attractions of phantasy to such an extent that we begin to react to the phantasy appearances in actions just as if perceptions were at stake: our fist clenches, we hold audible

dialogues with the imagined persons, and so on. Of course, precisely at that point the dream is in the habit of ending; actual perception chases off imagining. The more frequent case, however, is probably that in which the real world before our eyes is *almost* swallowed up while we pursue the phantasies, although that world makes us aware, in however minimal a way, of its factual existence, so that a faint consciousness that they are semblances constantly colors our phantasy formations. (*Ibid.*, nr. 1, § 20, 45).

A phenomenological description of imaginative apprehensions thus reveals the specific objectivity of what is imagined, but also the fact that the images we perceive are a medium of appearance for a subject of the image that can only be apprehended when the image-object is fading as such (see *Ibid.*, nr. 1, § 21, 47-48). Because of the constant tension between the different ways to look at an image (object oriented or subject oriented), images appear as windows in the field of perception, disrupting its concordant synthesis of appearance (*Ibid.*, nr. 1, § 22, 50).

Conflicting tendencies wrangle within the oscillating landscape of images, inviting either aesthetic approaches that explore their subject or perception-based analyses that consider images as specific objects among other objects. However, none of these tactics seems to deliver the truth about the materiality of what is imagined. While Husserl tries to solve this problem with the help of hyletic distinctions between the sensations and phantasms, I would like to focus on the noetic oscillation itself in order to explore the specific materiality of experience revealed in it. Indeed, the materiality of what is imagined seems to be crystalized best when we move from one type of apprehension to another, becoming aware of their contrast. While this transition seems to be driven by a certain negativity of images, which exhibits a sort of “nothingness” in the midst of our perceptions – as both Husserl and Sartre have shown (see Sartre 2004 [1940], 11ff.) – it also opens them up to new temporal and spatial horizons, to new hyletic strata and to new undetermined systems of concordance. And while they certainly cannot compete in robustness with the system of concordances regulating our perceptive field, they provide their own lines of continuity that we can notice in the experience of streaming images, watching a film, or remembering its specific atmosphere.

Commenting on Husserl’s analysis of imaginative acts, Marc Richir has described the transition from objectifying perception to illusion and back as a blink of the eye (*clignotement*) that plunges the material effectivity of our experience into the sway of illusion, while also bringing the latter into the heart of what is truly perceived (see Richir 2002: 69). The switch between perception and imagination thus reflects a deeper blinking at the heart of phenomenalization, understood as an adventurous process of coming to appearance in which illusion

is a constitutive part of what is truly perceived (see Richir 1991). Conversely, the tricks of the eye motivate our perseverance to perceive because they bring us so close to imagining what we see. It is thus clear that illusions are embedded in what we perceive and cannot easily be separated from it. The result of this imaginative intrusion is an appearance that is unstable, due to the imaginative materiality's fascinating density.

When we analyzed Husserl's examples of the (probably winter) visit of the botanical garden evoking "the trees rustling noisily, flowers blooming, slopes shaded" and of the travel book that conveys the "distant lands", we noticed that the poor sensuous presentation of the appearances allows for the summertime shine and foreign attractions to intrude in the field of what is merely perceived. Husserl notices the same sensuous fragility when he analyzes two other examples. The first is the reproduction of a painting of Raphael hanging above his desk, in which he sees "an achromatic little figure of a woman, about a foot and a half high, tinted only in black and white and surrounded by two little cherubs, considerably smaller and tinted in the same way" which contrasts significantly with "the form of a sublime woman, of superhuman size, two powerful and large young angels" (*Ibid.*) revealed by the imaginative consciousness applied to the same appearance. The second example is a photograph of his child, regarding which Husserl notes:

When I present my child "in" this image, I do not mean this miniature child appearing here in disagreeably grayish violet coloring. The miniature child is precisely not the child, but only the child's image. And if I speak of the image in this way or even say that the image has failed or that it does resemble the original, I do not, of course, mean the physical image, the physical thing that hangs there on the wall. The latter is a real thing; the former, however, is something that merely appears, that has never existed and never will exist. (*Ibid.*, § 21, 48)

On the basis of the resemblance that is supposed to structure image as "image of something else", these examples bring evidence for a troubling dissemblance between what is perceived and what is imagined. The real child has to be imagined in order to be restored in its reality and escape the "disagreeably grayish violet coloring" of the mere perception of the photograph, and the sublime woman of superhuman size has to appear in order to overcome the "achromatic little figure" representing her in the image. Following these descriptions, I would like to suggest that, properly speaking, the image-consciousness is not the provider of negativity, but rather the power that restores poor perceptive appearances to a richer deeper reality, which is brought into the perceptive field from another spatio-temporal environment.

If we now focus on the sensuous poverty of the imaginative appearance itself, we can notice how it invites a form of fulfilment that cannot be provided by mere perception. It is precisely because of its sensuous fragility that this appearance can convey other modes of apprehension and allow us to switch to them from the very heart of perception, without departing from it in an abrupt way. Our imaginative experience therefore seems to carry a specific excess of appearance that introduces, so to speak, new worlds into the fragile texture of some of our perceptions. The art reproductions hanging on our walls and photographs of our dear ones are not the only examples in which we can observe this phenomenal excess added to what we perceive. The world of our perception is instilled with images and imaginations that constantly redeem its pale presentation, doubling it with vivid colors that call for intense emotions and visions of other modes of existing. However, instead of interpreting this imaginative doubling of perception (see Dufourq 2011) as an attempt to escape toward a radically new horizon of experience – as Husserl tends to do when he focuses on “aesthetic experience” (*Ibid.*, nr. 1, § 19, 44) – I would like to consider it as the reverse of the same perceptive texture, that confers it a phenomenal “thickness” which grows profound in time.

3. THE MATERIALITY OF GESTURES: A VANISHING ARCHIVE

Eugen Fink has defined imagination as a “universal modification of the whole life of experience (*eine universale Modifikation des gesamten Erfahrungslebens*)” (Fink 1966 [1930]) because of its power to transform the entire framework of our perceptive world, conferring new dimensions to its appearance. The character of de-presentation (*Entgegenwärtigung*) and the window-feature (*Fensterhaftigkeit*) of images, which we mentioned earlier, are descriptive moments of this modification, which operates at a larger (“universal”) scale of experience. In my view, no radical modification is *de facto* necessary in order to move us from the merely perceived to something we imagine. The modification introduced by imagination should rather be understood, as we saw from the descriptions above, as a “slip”, a “blink” or a way of being “almost swallowed” in the world of phantasy. As fragile as their appearances might be, the fascination images have on us is undeniably imbricated in various forms of perception, affecting the process of its temporal unfolding and transforming its style. The materiality of imagination is thus to be understood as a phenomenal excess on the immanent impressions of our consciousness, which opens them to the broader horizon of other seasons of our life and other possible worlds (see Popa 2009). In this broader horizon, past and present experiences resonate and call on each other, beyond what can be inscribed in our consciously perceptive grasp. Limited to its actuality, the latter remains strangely poor and inexpressive. But connected to the imaginary dimen-

sion of our effective experience, it receives both a sense and a sensuous materiality that reveal its depth. It is thus important to make a distinction between the noetic excess described by Husserl in the *Logical Investigations* under the species of conscious apperception and the imaginative excess that weaves the materiality of phenomenality as such, as an appearance that is not merely contingent and superficial, having its own systematicity and its profundity.

How should we understand the depth that is introduced by imaginative experiences? It is important to stress that the doubling of perception and imagination is not a mere folding of our immediate impressions, since it is supported by a temporal flow of experience that connects our present to its past and to its future. We can see this process of temporalization at work in the experience of remembering, when it brings to the fore elements that have been forgotten, while at the same time sinking our daily life into the darkness of oblivion. While the first aspect of remembering is usually associated with the work of voluntary memory, the second aspect appears more clearly in involuntary memory, which is often triggered by a raw material sensation of a random object we might encounter (or not). This is what motivates Marcel Proust to write that the past is beyond the reach of our intelligence “and unmistakably present in some material object (or the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is” (quoted in Benjamin 1988 [1940], 158). In other words, contingent encounters activate dimensions of our past that are otherwise doomed to be lost, in the same way in which certain literary explorations unleash “the Nile of language, which [...] overflows and fructifies the regions of truth”, in the field of our experience (Benjamin 1988 [1929], 201).

Examining involuntary memory, we learn that the past is not simply another dimension of our experience that is always available to our present, but rather something that was once with us and we have lost, which we can only hope to have the chance to encounter again, through a fugitive image that allows us to connect with the sense sedimented at its core. But in order for such an encounter to become possible, we need to first become aware of the “incurable imperfection laying in the essence of the present itself” (*l'imperfection incurable dans l'essence même du présent*) (*Ibid.*, 203), which can be comprehended in Proustian terms as a hopeless sadness of its finitude or in Husserlian terms as a poor sensuous presentation that calls for imaginative completion.

The double process at work in the art of remembering – recalling what has been forgotten and sinking into oblivion – is captured by Walter Benjamin when he comments in “The Image of Proust”:

Is it not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance

is the woof and forgetting the warp, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity, and even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. This is why Proust finally turned his days into nights, devoting all his hours to undisturbed work in his darkened room with artificial illumination, so that none of those intricate arabesques might escape him. (*Ibid.*, 202)

From this perspective, where the textual and fluvial unity of literary creation is destined to reveal "the pattern on the back side of the tapestry" (*Ibid.*, 203) and thus fertilize "the regions of truth", there is a work of forgetting that grows with every attempt to recall the past – which is not without connection to the work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*). Through this hidden work of oblivion, our experience gains its density and its mysterious opacity. Yet, conceiving of forgetting as of a process that thickens the texture of the lived experience also means that its territory constantly expands beyond what we can consciously grasp, directly or indirectly.

How do images and imagination relate then to oblivion and how does their specific materiality participate in this double aspect of remembering? In order to answer this question, it is now time to connect our reflections on the de-presentation of imagination with our descriptions of the way in which it expands and densifies perceptive presentation. Following Benjamin, I will define image generally as a mode of encounter with temporal aspects of our experience that cannot be disclosed in the actuality of the present. Since time is a complex stream that does not merely flow through our existence, but also constantly reveals new aspects of its passing, images crystallize attachments and tonalities, sudden revelations and progressive clarifications that can only become possible as time unfolds its multiple adumbrations.

We find a more specific determination of the temporal dimension of this imaginative materiality in Giorgio Agamben when he sees image as "the reification and the obliteration of a gesture" (Agamben 2000 [1996], 55) which nevertheless preserves something of its initial dynamic. The connection between image and gesture is not straightforward, especially if we remain at a visual level of description that is often adopted by Husserl's static phenomenology. However, if we move toward the terrain of genetic phenomenology, we can examine the relationship between gesture and image from the standpoint of a temporalization that necessarily affects our body and even stems from the body. Agamben notes that the reification of gesture in image "corresponds to a recollection seized by

voluntary memory”, whereas their dynamic core “corresponds to the image flashing in the epiphany of involuntary memory” (*Ibid.*). And he adds:

[..] while the former lives in magical isolation, the latter always refers beyond itself to a whole of which it is a part. Even the *Mona Lisa*, even the *Las Meninas* could be seen not as immovable and eternal forms, but as fragments of a gesture or as stills of a lost film wherein they would only regain their true meaning (*Ibid.*).

What does it mean for an image to be apprehended as a fragment of a gesture? The vanishing materiality of gesture provides the broader texture out of which images are shaped. When the latter escape the rigidification that threatens to capture them, they disclose a bodily movement that precedes sense-givenness and even immediate sensation. While Vilém Flusser has defined gesture as a “micro-event” through which “a freedom is expressed” (Flusser 2014, 164 and 171), I would like to focus here on gesture’s complex expressivity that not only supports spoken language, but also manifests somehow beyond it. The independence of gestures in regard to discursive language – and to voluntary memory – appears, as Flusser has shown, through their aesthetic value. However, this independence can also be observed in their relationship to truth in general and to the truthfulness of experience in particular. It is thus interesting to notice the exhibitory element of gestures, thanks to which, even when they hide something, they end up by revealing something else. Moreover, gestures seem to be driven by an antagonistic movement of expression and impression, revealing and containing at the same time. As a consequence, gestures are never unilateral movements that deliver their materiality transparently. Rather, they seem to affirm the raw truth of being a body that has a history – which is not only the trajectory of an individual sense-formation made of specific modalities of expression, but also the history of an ambiguous co-belonging to the world of multiple trajectories sharing common paths (see Tengelyi 2004). Gestures thus carry the material truth of multiple sense-sedimentations which fuse, resonate, and repress each other, always in tension and in the making – a truth which is both relative and absolute, depending on the standpoint from which it is examined.

When Agamben describes gestures with the help of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetic manifesto, as disclosing a bodily medium suspended between desire and fulfilment, it is because, as we can see in dance for example, they carry both “the endurance and the exhibition of the media character of corporal movements” (*Ibid.*: 58). Dance, pornography, and mime are conveyed as examples of a “process of making a means visible as such” (*Ibid.*) prompting a pleasure that supplements the one that stems from their mere immediate performance. Interestingly, the element of passive endurance is here key for understanding the materiality of gestures: “What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported” (*Ibid.*, 57).

To clarify this passive aspect of gesture, I would like to suggest that its enduring component can be comprehended with the help of a phenomenological concept of the archive. Understood in a Foucauldian fashion not only as a deposited document of one given experience, but also as a regulative principle that allows for different experiences to be grouped together in such a way that they find a common and yet heterogenous expression (Foucault 1972), this concept also borrows from Derrida's reflections on the archival status of memory, which provides it with an unexpected form of materiality (Derrida 1996). Without inscribing them in a perfectly homogenous continuity, the archive allows for multiple elements of experience to co-exist and grow together, engaging in modes of association that their mere isolated existence would not have made possible. Pushing our former argument about remembering further, involuntary memory might be seen as the process of conveying to us archives of the past in such a way that our present recognizes in them its obscure materiality, to be stored and explored.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS: BEYOND A MATERIAL PERSPECTIVISM

In this paper, I explored several possibilities to consider the materiality of experience phenomenologically. Starting from a reflection on the phenomenological reduction and the eidetic variation in Husserl, as well as on the material foundation of human freedom offered by later phenomenological texts, my goal has been to clarify the status and function of a phenomenological materiality. I have first analyzed the noetic materiality of the intentional sense uncovered in Husserl's fifth *Logical Investigation* and the hyletic materiality that the intentional sense is supposed to give a shape. Exploring the rich resources of Henry's material phenomenology, I also showed the limits of its "phenomenological" approach, which excludes certain dimensions of phenomenality and forecloses its affective intensity. Directing the inquiry toward this "other side" of phenomenality, I focused on the specific materiality of imaginative appearances, which is made of contrasts, conflicts and tensions between various types of intentional apprehension and hyletic content. Following Husserl's descriptions of images, image-consciousness and phantasy, I examined the hypothesis of a specific materiality of imagination that is no other than the excess of phenomenality itself on sensible impressions.

In the last part of the paper, I further examined the distinction between the hyletic materiality of phainology and the moving materiality of a phenomenist phenomenology with the help of Benjamin's investigation of remembering, considered as a double process of recollection and forgetting. In this double process, oblivion presents interesting affinities with the materiality of imagination, since it participates in conferring our lived experience a depth and a density that remain

ultimately inaccessible to the light of our consciousness. I suggested that the unconscious dimension of the work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*) can illuminate its realm, as it deals with the irremediable loss of time and experience that can only be redeemed through certain images of the past that revive the present. In order to capture this material depth of experience that phantasy-life and forgetting seem to secretly weave, I turned toward the domain of bodily expressivity, reflecting on the relationship between image and gesture. Agamben's definition of image as a fragment of a gesture that is both rigidified and maintained in its dynamism has guided me to the final thesis of a vanishing materiality of gestures, in which an antagonist dynamic of externalizing and internalizing, expressing and impressing, can be observed.

One way to situate this antagonism in relationship to the temporal process of sense-formation (*Sinnbildung*) is to understand gesture as an archive of past experiences that are grouped together without losing their heterogeneity. While this definition of gesture as an archive requires further elaborations exceeding the limited framework of this paper, I would like to close with a reflection on its relationship to the temporal process of sense-making, which is, as we saw, imbricated in our bodily expressivity in such a way that it connects us with former experiences while at the same time resisting a straightforward understanding of their meaning. The attempt to give the concept of archive a phenomenological foundation is related to a reflection on the phenomenological status of forms of life, made possible through a progressive formation of our life that is constantly sedimented and rediscovered in time. However, if we understand life's formation as a genesis of forms and images (*Bildung*), we can also notice fragments of gesture that are constantly brought back to us, in a manner that shapes the style of our existential discoveries. If the dynamic core that images inherit from gestures corresponds, as Agamben writes, "to the image flashing in the epiphany of involuntary memory" (Agamben 2000 [1996], 55), gestures present themselves as vanishing archives offered to the future and illuminate our past, having something to offer to the future because they retain something from the past that might otherwise have been lost.

What are the consequences of these explorations of the materiality of experience for our initial problem? Intentional sense, sensible strata, and their essential auto-affection, twisted imaginative appearances and the vanishing materiality of gestures from which they are detached – all encapsulate distinct dimensions of an experiential materiality that seems to require a perspectivist method in order to be considered in its complexity. However, one can hope to escape the methodological limitations of such a perspectivism and its inherent relativism by continuing to reflect on the structural connections existing between these different dimensions. Since none of them is sufficient to univocally determine the direction of a materialist phenomenology today, further elaborating on their co-

dependency will allow us to understand an experiential materiality that is both produced and discovered by phenomenological analysis, in its attempt to recognize in our experience a moving affective ground, a milieu of sense-formation, and a temporal sedimentation whose heterogeneity is always surprisingly reaffirmed in our most trivial gestures.²

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