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## Resistance of the Sensible World: An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty by Emmanuel Alloa, trans. Jane Marie Todd

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*Resistance of the Sensible World: An Introduction to Merleau-Ponty.* By EMMANUEL ALLOA. Trans. by JANE MARIE TODD. New York: Fordham University Press. 2017. xxii + 128 pp. £23.99. ISBN 978-0-8232-7568-7.

Alloa's concise and impeccably informed overview of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology has an ambitious twofold aim: 'to introduce Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre to those unacquainted with it and to allow those already versed in it new access to its deeper implications' (p.13). In the service of the first sub-aim, the book recommends a standard, and natural, way of partitioning Merleau-Ponty's work into three overlapping phases. The first chapter focuses on his early and best-known works, *The Structure of Behaviour* and *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Ph.P*). There Merleau-Ponty argues that our perceptual and cognitive relation to the world is fundamentally mediated by bodily habits and capacities, and that understanding this mediation allows us to avoid the pitfalls of 'empiricist' (causal/mechanistic) and 'intellectualist' (rationalist and idealist) conceptions of the relations between mind, body and world. Alloa's second chapter focuses on language, the preoccupation of Merleau-Ponty's 'middle phase' exemplified by work collected in *The Prose of the World* and *Signs*. Roughly, according to Alloa, Merleau-Ponty comes to think that his earlier work overemphasises the expressive, meaning-making powers of individual embodied subjects and underemphasizes the ways in which meaning emerges from a structure that necessarily transcends the individual subjects who participate in it. The ways in which linguistic meaning emerges from the structural relationships between intra-linguistic components in Merleau-Ponty's creative interpretation of Saussurian linguistics becomes the paradigm case for the emergence of meaning and significance in general. Alloa's penultimate chapter focuses on the nascent 'ontology of the flesh' presented in Merleau-Ponty's incomplete, posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* (*VI*). Merleau-Ponty's final work attempts to articulate a vision of the body/world relationship that sees bodies as privileged aspects of an overarching totality that Merleau-Ponty names 'flesh'. The phenomenologist's job is to analyse this totality, and to explain how subjects, objects, and the apparent opposition between the two emerge from it. *VI* is thus presented as an attempt to reconcile *Ph.P*'s emphasis on the meaning-making powers of the body with Merleau-Ponty's middle-period emphasis on the emergence of meaning from supra-personal structures.

Whilst there are differences in emphasis and presentation, Alloa's vision of Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre and its narrative coherence is familiar from elsewhere in the secondary literature. Nonetheless, Alloa presents it with impressive concision and lucidity. Alloa's second sub-aim involves uncovering an overlooked continuity between the three phases above – the way in which each problematizes the notion of 'transparency', or (equivalently) takes up the titular theme of the 'resistance of the sensible world' by revealing a form of *mediation* as fundamental to experiences of meaning. Meaning is mediated in the first phase by the bodily relationship between subject and world, and in the second by the supra-personal structures in which embodied subjects participate. In the third phase, meaning, language, and everything else are mediated by 'flesh', the overarching term of which all phenomena are mere aspects. Alloa's concluding chapter aims to look beyond Merleau-Ponty's work and further describe the necessary structure of the fleshy phenomenology towards which *VI* points.

Alloa's aim to write an introductory work that breaks new interpretative ground pulls in opposing directions. Merleau-Ponty's work is centrally informed by engagements with Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Gestalt Psychology, Freud, Bergson, Marcel, Saussure, Sartre, and more. The depth of Alloa's treatment reflects these engagements, but its brevity precludes a full explanation of any of them. Consequently, Alloa's book is not an

ideal introduction for beginners. It will be most accessible to those somewhat familiar with Merleau-Ponty's palette of influences, or with a particular phase of his work. On the other hand, aficionados of the secondary literature might justifiably seek clarification of Alloa's claim that his interpretation provides *new* access to deeper implications of Merleau-Ponty's work. The three-phase narrative sketched above is not unique to Alloa, and while his overarching motif of transparency and resistance is undeniably a useful and overlooked interpretative lens, it is reasonable to ask whether this lens allows us to see anything in Merleau-Ponty not already revealed by others.

If Alloa's book only partly succeeds in its aim, it is nonetheless an astonishing achievement. He distils thousands of pages of visionary published and unpublished work into one hundred lucid and insight-packed pages. Anyone with an interest in Merleau-Ponty will benefit from reading it. For readers with some knowledge of Merleau-Ponty's influences seeking a concise introduction to his work, or for those familiar with one phase of his work seeking a window onto the other aspects of his thought, I know of no better resource.

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