

## A PRESENCE WITHOUT PRESENT: MAKING SENSE WITH THE OTHER

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**ABSTRACT.** Marc Richir's phenomenological work proposes a new type of phenomenology, a non-standard one. To him, a non-standard phenomenology is, first of all, a phenomenology that is "crossing the barrier of intentionality" (Richir, 2015). In this context, perception has a special role. Firstly, it involves *phantasia*, and not the imaginary. Secondly, it is a perception of non-intentional objects. Because of these two reasons, *the other* becomes *the Other*, namely a non-intentional object that cannot be pinpointed in a definite time / space frame. In this paper, I will try to demonstrate that, starting from this lack of conceptualization that the Other represents, a sense is constructed. It is a *sense in the making* (*sens se faisant*), as Richir puts it (Richir 1988, 2015); a sense whose never-ending development gives meaning to someone's life. In order for this to take place, the effective presence of the Other is crucial. Otherwise, sense stands still and meaning is aborted.

**Keywords:** *sense in the making, "perceptive" phantasia, the Other, phenomenological unconscious, symbolical institution.*

**RÉSUMÉ .** L'œuvre phénoménologique de Marc Richir propose un nouveau type de phénoménologie, non standard. Pour lui, une phénoménologie non standard est avant tout une phénoménologie qui « franchit la barrière de l'intentionnalité » (Richir, 2015). Dans ce contexte, la perception tient un rôle particulier. Premièrement, elle implique la phantasia et non l'imaginaire. Deuxièmement, il s'agit d'une perception d'objets non intentionnels. Pour ces deux raisons, l'autre devient l'Autre, à savoir un objet non intentionnel qui ne peut pas être repéré dans un cadre temps / espace défini. Dans cet article, je vais essayer de démontrer que, à partir de ce manque de conceptualisation que représente l'Autre, un sens se construit. C'est un sens se faisant, selon Richir (Richir 1988, 2015) ; un sens dont le développement infini donne du sens à la vie de quelqu'un. Pour que cela se produise, la présence effective de l'Autre est cruciale. Sinon, le sens s'immobilise et la signification est avortée.

**Mots-clés :** *sens se faisant, l'Autre, institution symbolique, inconscient phénoménologique.*

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## 1. Sense-Making as a Gesture

This article starts by trying to explain what *making sense* means in the context of the phenomenology of Marc Richir. First of all, according to Marc Richir there is no pre-defined or fixed sense for someone to grasp for: sense is always in the making (Richir, 1988, 2006). Any instituted sense is an aborted one, and it seems like only what is spoken or written between the lines has true meaning. In other words, it is not *the concept* that is significant but *the conceptualization*, namely the process involved when language, in any form, is used.

On the other hand, the process involved is, according to Richir, a passion (he is speaking about *passion du penser*). This has a very important consequence: in what regards conceptualization, the latter is not only a presumed cognitive process, but a somatic one, too. Mind and body (i.e. *soma*), they both participate in sense-making. At this point, it should be noted that Marc Richir uses in his phenomenology a very clear-cut distinction between body as *anatomical body* and body as *lived body*. In this respect, he uses a distinction Edmund Husserl has made long before him, namely the distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* (Ciocan, 2013: 26).

Let us stipulate for now that *Leib*, a lived body, is what participates in the process of sense-making, namely the process of conceptualization. *Leib* is not just a body that lives and is lived, but is also a body that has flesh (*chair*). *Leib* is an incarnated body, language being its proper flesh.

About language, Marc Richir has a very particular view, as well. First of all, for him there is no metalanguage. There are only language phenomena (*phénomènes du langage*). Secondly, language has more like a transcendental value for him and only what is instituted, namely aborted sense, has “empirical”, cognitive value. In this context, there is always something that remains unsaid; that is another reason why sense is *sense in the making* (Richir, 2006).

Let us clarify the first point. Why are metalanguage and language phenomena two different things and what are language phenomena? Since, as said before, language has to Marc Richir a transcendental value, it could be argued that language, in his view, is nothing more than a metalanguage. At this point, no confusion should be made between what is beyond *experience*, namely transcendental, and what is beyond *language*, namely metalanguage. What Marc Richir is saying is not that, beyond language, there is another language that surpasses the former, but that language itself surpasses experience. Therefore, language phenomena are nothing more than a phenomenalisation of this language that makes experience possible. This clearly shows that language phenomena and metalanguage are two different things (Richir, 1988). In the first case, we find an actualization of the condition of possibility of experience while in the second case we are dealing with a tautology that circles around language. There is a big difference between the two.

Why is it that only what is instituted from language has an “empirical” cognitive value, namely can be put into words and passed on? What does it mean to institute language? The answer to the first question ensues from the answer to the second.

In his phenomenology, Marc Richir relies on two different registers of reality: the symbolical one and the phenomenological one. The first register belongs to the *Gestell*, to a frame or network that imposes certain norms regarding the sense. In other words, for something to make sense, one must abide to the patterns proper to a culture, a certain grammar or musicality proper to a particular language, the way people gesticulate or even the way they express their feelings, and so on.

Of course, all this is done unconsciously. There is no conscious decision for someone to take when it comes to obeying the *Gestell*. In addition, here is the answer to the above question: to institute language means to comply with the *Gestell* and enter the symbolical register. Obviously, the symbolical register comprises not only spoken or written word, but also gestures, images, numbers, signs; in general, everything that has meaning for more than one person.

The second register, the phenomenological one, underlies the first register. There are no constraints here. It is the free and *anarchic* place of the wild essences (*Wessen sauvages*) (Richir, 1988, Merleau-Ponty, 1968). It contains bits and pieces of words, gestures, images, smells, and so on, which combine with one another in a *synesthetic* way. Language as transcendental language belongs directly to this register, it is pre-reflexive and, once again, unconscious. Only that, this time, another type of unconscious is to be found. In the first case we have *the symbolical unconscious*, the one psychoanalysis is speaking of, says Richir, while in this second case we deal with *the phenomenological unconscious* (Richir, 1988).

Given the context, Richir defines language phenomena as “these phenomena [...] which have already partially opened up to themselves in a fleeting way seeking to stabilize or `possess` itself, dependent or not on the linguistic expression” (Richir, 2006: 95)<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, Richir explains that what happens in such phenomena is similar to when someone having the *presentiment* of a sense begins to speak it or to write it down. Of course, once one of these actions is done, we realize that what was spoken or written is not exactly what we had in mind or what we anticipated. This failure of transferring the sense from the phenomenological register to the symbolical one exemplifies very well the idea that the instituted (or delivered) sense is an abortion. Since the phenomenological sense is not exhausted by the symbolical one, there will always be something that remains unspoken.

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<sup>2</sup> « ces phénomènes, qu'ils relèvent ou non de l'expression linguistique, où, selon certains enchaînements, du sens, qui s'est déjà entrouvert à lui-même de façon fugace, cherche à se stabiliser ou à se "posséder" »

That is why this phenomenological sense is actually *sense (in the) making*. It only contains, as Marc Richir puts it, *the promise of a sense*, but not the sense itself (Richir, 1988).

## 2. Sense-Making and “Perceptive” *Phantasia*

A good example for what Marc Richir is trying to say is non-figurative art. Of course, as any example, it is only an approximation, since an instituted language can still be found there. The painter, no matter how abstract he/she is, still complies with some norms when creating the painting. Nevertheless, what is instituted is so hard to define that a non-figurative painting as an illustration for what is named by Richir transcendental landscape is acceptable. The transcendental landscape represents exactly *the promise of a sense* and belongs to the phenomenological unconscious (Richir, 1988).

Both the symbolical unconscious and the phenomenological unconscious presuppose non-intentionality. The processes taking place in both cases are not intended by the subject, but still, the latter does participate. Anyway, I submit that in Marc Richir’s phenomenology this point of non-intentionality is the cross point between the symbolical unconscious and the phenomenological unconscious, namely between the symbolical register and the phenomenological one. What marks this point of intersection is “perceptive” *phantasia* (Richir, 2015).

It is important to note that Marc Richir puts the word *perceptive* between quotation marks. He does so in order to highlight the fact that what is involved is not perception in the true sense of the word. Since what is perceived is a non-intentional object, we can hardly speak of perception in the traditional way. However, then again, Marc Richir’s phenomenology is hardly a standard one. As he himself declares, his phenomenology must go beyond the barrier of intentionality. To accept this endeavour is not too hard to do. What is harder though, given what has been said above, is to understand this idea of a non-intentional object. The dilemma is: if it is non-intentional, how can it be an object?

To answer this question, I will use another example, one used by Marc Richir himself in the interview book *L’écart et le rien*. In fact, the problem is very simple. Imagine what happens when you go to the theatre and watch a play. The actor on the stage plays a role. But whom do you see there? The actor himself or rather the character he is playing? The answer depends on how strong you are connected with the play. If the play does not wake up your interest, then you will begin to see only the actor, judge his/her appearance, his/her manner to interpret the role, and so on. In other words, you will become judgmental and you will not

see in full the character of the play. Well, in this case the example is not very helpful for me because, since there is judgment involved, there is intentionality also. Nevertheless, let us presuppose that the play is very good, and so is the actor. Then you become absorbed into the play and you forget about the actor. But does this mean that you do not see him/her anymore? Does this mean that you do not perceive him/her? The actor is obviously there, in front of you. Therefore, you see him, and yet... you do not. The actor is an object, but a non-intentional one (Richir, 2015).

How is such a thing even possible? In Marc Richir's terms, two things are happening simultaneously. First: you are drawn to a more profound register than that of the imaginary, namely to the register of *phantasia*. Second: the actor lends his *Leib* to the character. Such is the way the character comes to life...

*Phantasia* is a notion Marc Richir borrows from Edmund Husserl and is something not quite the same as fantasy (Ciocan, 2013). While fantasy entails the ability to imagine things, real or not, *phantasia* has little to do with the image. At most, *phantasia* is a shadow, or better yet, the shadow of a shadow.

When seen from the depths of *phantasia*, the actor himself becomes a shadow, too. Thus, he as a person disappears and becomes the mere carrier of what the character is supposed to be. At this point the input from the other side, namely from the side of the actor, is crucial. As he disappears he has to give life to the character and, to do so, a certain amount of tact is necessary. It depends only on the actor's ability to act that the language is instituted in such a way that the character gets a *Leib*, namely an incarnated lived/living body.

### 3. Making Sense as Presence without Assignable Present

However, under what aspect does this character live? Of course, he lives only in our *phantasia*... but still, he is present. The character of the play is there, in front of us: he speaks, he moves, he gesticulates, he thinks, he suffers, and so on. Just that, when the play is over, his life is over, too. In other words, his temporal frame is limited by that of the play. The character does not have a life of its own. When leaving the stage he does not continue to phenomenalize himself, namely he does not inscribe himself in a temporal succession. In short, the character is *atemporal* and *ahistorical*. Thus, despite the fact that the character is present or is there, from a historical point of view, he is not. It is impossible for us to assign a specific time for his presence, which is why, to describe the aspect the character lives under, the expression a *presence without assignable present* is more than adequate.

I have taken this expression from Marc Richir (*une présence sans présent assignable*, he says) (Richir, 1988). He uses it to designate an impossibility both at the microcosm and the macrocosm levels, I claim.

By the microcosm impossibility I refer to what happens in the first example I used, the one regarding *sense (in the) making*. In a non-figurative work of art, there certainly is a sense, but one that cannot be comprised in one defined concept. It is impossible to do so, which is why the work of art in question is in itself *a presence without present*. Or, better yet, an image of such a presence, because, at this level, Marc Richir uses this expression to pinpoint the moment before a sense unfolds itself, namely the above mentioned moment of *presentiment*. Therefore, in a way, *a presence without present* is the *presentiment of a sense*.

The macrocosm level reveals all kinds of impossibilities. The Other (with a capital o) is such an impossibility, alongside language itself or a fictional character, as I exemplified above. Another good example for what is the impossibility of *a presence without present* is the mother. According to Richir the mother incarnates such a presence for the child. Of course, this is valid for any person who nourishes and cares for a newborn baby but, for the sake of simplicity, I will use the mother-child couple.

More than a couple, the mother and the child form a totality at the beginning. Starting from this totality, Richir claims, a *genetic phenomenology* develops. You will understand now that what I announced in the title of my presentation, namely *making sense with the Other*, is based on this idea of genetic phenomenology.

In short, genetic phenomenology deals with the phenomenalization of man starting from his early stages, the mother-child totality being its point of origin. In other words, genetic phenomenology describes *the process of humanization*. I am not saying that a newborn is not human from the start. I only say that what is a possibility, a potentiality, must be actualized and for that to happen the presence of another is crucial. Alterity is a necessity, is what I am trying to say.

For someone who does not have yet any “empirical” powers to use his cognitive capabilities, as is the case with a newborn, alterity is not a fixed and defined concept. In other words, for the child, *the other* lacks determinations, namely lacks any image. The Other *just is*, that is why I emphasize the fact that it is written with a capital o.

#### 4. The Other Makes Sense

While for us the mother is *the other*, or just another human being among others, namely she has certain determinations, for the child she is *the Other* (capital o). Marc Richir uses even stronger words to describe the mother: she is an *absolute transcendence* – I will not comment on that. Still, before being an *absolute transcendence*, she is nothing more than an extension of the child’s body, in the same

way as the child is an extension of the mother's body. This corporeal co-dependence involves the *body* in the mother-child totality. *A good enough mother*, an expression Richir borrows from Donald Winnicott, must be that mother who initiates the split and breaks this totality (Richir 1988, Winnicott 2005). Of course, this break presupposes negotiation, which is why she is not supposed to be too good at it; she must be good in a *reasonable* way.

Two things result from this rupture. The first is the ability for the child (and for the mother also) to live his/her own body, namely the ability to have a *Leib*. The second is the ability of the child to have a feeling of some sense to come. Breaking the totality leaves an empty space in which language can find place. Thus, the institution of language and the entering in the symbolical register can take place. The process of humanization, which is a process of making sense, begins.

How can the totality be broken? Marc Richir answers: because of *the gaze* of the Other (Richir, 2010). This meeting with the gaze of the Other can be a good one or a bad one. In order to be a good one (or, good enough one), the child must be seen as something more than just an object. In the same way as when you are watching a play, you are not staring at the actor but you are contemplating the character that is beyond, in the same way the mother should not see only what is in front of her, but also should see something that escapes her eyes and is a *mystery* to her. What escapes is nothing more than the mystery of subjectivity.

Thus, the gaze presumes the "perceptive" *phantasia* of a non-intentional object. It presumes an encounter at a phenomenological level, namely at the level of the transcendental interfacticity, where the phenomenological unconscious is to be found. There is not a conscious decision involved in the gaze, as it is not a conscious decision to be impressed by a nonfigurative work of art or by a play.

If the encounter with the gaze of the Other, made effective by the mother, is a good one, then the child can adopt a subjective attitude, he too can be *an Other / another*, he can live his own life, namely he can now phenomenize himself (Richir, 2010). This cannot be done without the other phenomenon that is language, which enters through the elementary particle of language that the gaze represents. The gaze speaks and invites the other to speak up, to open up and express himself, namely to create sense (i.e. sense-making) ... and to make sense.

## 5. Conclusion

The presence of the Other as *presence without assignable present* is not only necessary from a psychological point of view, as it facilitates cognitive development, the ability to relate with other human beings, empathy and so on, but it is also necessary from a phenomenological point of view, as it puts in question one's own

very subjective existence. Thus, the necessity for an Other to be present goes hand in hand with the necessity for language to be present also. Without language, there is no medium between the subject who struggles to find his/her identity and the presence of the Other who is trying not to interfere too much in the process. The ambiguity language brings into the relation between the two makes room for questioning both the presence of the Other and the presence of the subject itself. Trying to find an answer equals for the subject as being able to formulate an essential question regarding his/her existence: Who am I? At this point, it is not the answer important anymore but the fact that a subjective position can be assumed.

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