

Operative Imagination. Material, Technological, Political Trajectories

Chiasmi International. Contemporary Phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty Studies

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OPERATIVE IMAGINATION. Material, Technological, Political Trajectories

edited by Anna Caterina Dalmaso, Sofia Pirandello, Danilo Saretta Verissimo

Papers accepted in English, French, Italian.

The concept of imagination oscillates between several radical alternatives: is it a capacity engaged in acts of simulation, or a dimension that grounds our relationship with the world? Is it an expression of fantasy or a constitutive element of our sense of reality? A mental representation or a pre-reflective experience? An autonomous faculty or a situated and material practice? Moreover, is it at the origin of image production, or a phenomenon that results from it? These polarities have acquired new relevance especially in light of the contemporary mediascape, bringing back into play an economy of imagination that philosophy is called upon to understand in its historicity.

The regime of digital media has brought about a saturation of images and normalised access to virtual worlds, now integrated into our everyday practices, while technological devices generate or intensify new forms of visual colonisation through strategies of attention capture, acting upon the normativity of bodies and discourses. These ongoing transformations come to put into question some decisive conceptual coordinates: how does our embodied engagement with devices, interfaces, and multisensory environments reshape the activity of imagination? How is our way of imagining transformed through the contact with interactive and inhabitable images? Although the powers of imagination seem to have increased dramatically, don't they secretly end up atrophying? We are urged to interrogate the powers of imagination, its relationship with perception and action, and its capacity to engage with the invisible and the unimaginable.

The special section "Operative Imagination" sets out to explore this constellation of questions through an engagement with the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, while also welcoming perspectives that develop from his philosophy or dialogue with it, to explore the historical transformations of the imagination, image and imaginary. This orientation reflects the renewed editorial direction of Chiasmi International, which, beginning with issue 25, has extended its scope to embrace the broader phenomenological field and to cultivate dialogue between Merleau-Ponty's work and major strands of contemporary philosophy and critical thought.

Although Merleau-Ponty never offered a systematic theory of imagination, his work nonetheless opens key paths for thinking through the tensions and challenges of our present situation. By taking on Husserl's insights, the French philosopher places imagination at the core of perceptual experience as an implicit texture, a virtual and operative background, a bodily opening onto the world. Imagination here is not a private mental faculty, but a structural dimension of the lived body's relation to reality: its inherent tendency to project itself elsewhere, to reach beyond its own limits. In this sense, imagination becomes another name for the virtuality and plasticity of the body, a dynamic system of possible relations.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as a virtual rather than merely physical entity entails, at the ontological level, a move beyond the traditional opposition between the real and the imaginary, reconfigured as a dynamic relation of latency and reversibility, always on the verge of unfolding. The imaginary is no longer confined to the realm of the unreal or to a figurative mode of thought; rather, it is reconceived not as something separate from experience, but as an inherent dimension that constantly accompanies the emergence of the real, shaping and modulating its scope. This reconceptualisation situates the imaginary within the domain of praxis and the social world, in the very processes of sedimentation and crystallisation that give rise to ideological or mythical formations. The operative and transformative power of imagination thus becomes effective at the level of the imaginary and therefore of the collective, and it is all the more important to investigate it in light of the constant redefinition of the concept of "reality", typical of the most contemporary times. Merleau-Ponty's thought has become a frequent point of reference not only in ecological approaches to aesthetics but also in recent strands of analytic philosophy. Both have drawn on his ideas of bodily virtuality and embodied experience to articulate the notions of an extended mind and a distributed subject. The philosopher has come to occupy a central place in many areas of the cognitive sciences that explore how the body, material environment, and artefacts contribute to the formation of thought and, more broadly, to human experience itself.

Today, Merleau-Ponty's thought is increasingly drawn upon to develop an understanding of imagination as a material process, that emerges through the active interplay of bodies and environments. In this light, imagination also becomes an opening onto an intersubjective and intercorporeal dimension: a way of thinking-with the other (human and non-human) that opens up to unexpected experiences, multiplies perspectival access to the world, and allows us to envision the time to come. Merleau-Ponty's work thus laid the groundwork for a philosophical approach to imagination as a force of hybridisation with the other, an idea that continues to inform and inspire a wide range of diverse reflections, still engaged in reworking both the philosopher's insights and his unspoken intuitions.

Suggested (non-exhaustive) thematic areas:

- Contemporary interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's thought in connection with imagination
- Phenomenological approaches to imagination
- Material and embodied dimensions of imaginative processes
- The interplay between imagination and technology
- Theories of the image and the imaginary
- Collective imagination, perspectival plurality, and shared worlds
- Decolonial perspectives on imagination
- Political and economic dynamics of imagination
- Case studies on disrupted or dysfunctional modes of imagining

– Artistic practices, forms of resistance, and media-based activism

Deadlines:

Submission of abstracts (300-500 words) and a brief bio-bibliographical note, to chiasmiinternationaljournal@gmail.com: November 15th 2025

Notification of acceptance of abstracts: December 1st 2025

Submission of full articles (40.000 characters, spaces included): February 15th 2026

Feedback from peer review: March 15th 2026

Submission of final (revised) articles: April 15th 2026

Reference:

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