Keynote Lecture: International Merleau-Ponty Circle Conference, Villanova University, USA, 25 October 2025

OPENING REMARKS

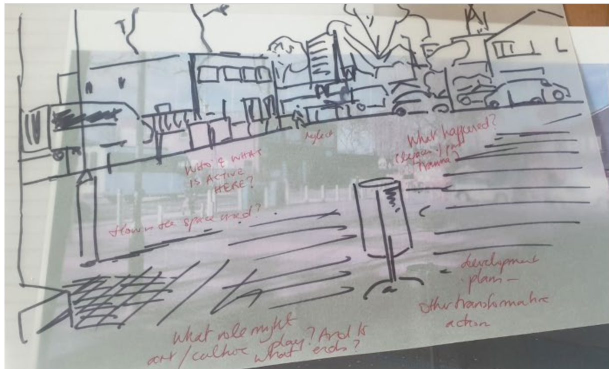
Thank you so much for this invitation. I am honoured to have this opportunity to present a juxtaposition of ideas I am trying to think through under the [working] title of *Actuating Phenomenology, Virtue Ethics and Art to prefigure a Grace-filled Politics*. (*Prefiguring a Grace-Filled Politics* would have been more elegant.)

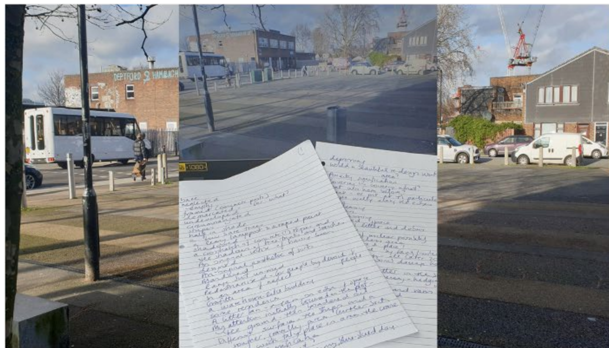
I would also, and particularly, like to congratulate the forward thinking of the conference co-directors Martina Ferrari and Whitney Howell for enabling us to reflect on matters phenomenological, imaginative, aesthetic, and political at such a globally consequential moment in the USA, and in a location, Pennsylvania, which is repeatedly described as the USA's "largest battleground state," and a swing or pivot state, in the run up to polling day.

Themes of embattlement and enmity as well as the metaphor of the 'pivot' and its philosophical as well as practical possibilities will recur in the context of this paper. Significantly, 'pivot', as well as hinge, which allows for a more limited rotational range, are motifs also often found in the writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Juxtapositions of embattlement/enmity/pivot/hinge are also a recurrent concern in my academic work and—on a practical level —arise in ongoing local community projects I'm involved with: caring for a public green space in a challenging part of London; collaborating with an HIV support group consisting of African immigrants who are also

involved in health justice and anti-stigma work; engaging with a neglected public square outside of a health centre. That is, I find myself consistently drawn to scenarios that are in some way contested or otherwise troubled and I am motivated to discover how they might be re-perceived and re-energised as pivotal for positive change. Here, I have found that strategies drawn from Merleau-Ponty's non-dual, embodied and perceptually grounded thought, especially in the form of early-stage visual or pictorial research …





Interviewing Images: How visual research using IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) can illuminate the change-making possibilities of place, space, and dwelling

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ABSTRACT

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative method mainly used in psychology, the social sciences and health science. Beginning with processes of open question interviewing, and taking an idiographic approach, it elicits unusually rich data from persons about specific life experiences, opportunities, and challenges. In so doing, it generates flexibility of thought and feeling, and evokes unanticipated insight. As a visual culture scholar, and inspired by the distinctly visual connotations of the word inter-view, I propose that our understanding of contemporary lived experience and our attempts at change-making might be extended if the descriptive, analytical and interpretative techniques of IPA were applied to the image-worlds (and object-worlds) that play a role in shaping us as individuals, citizens, and researchers. But is it possible to interview images without this being merely or wholly a process of projecting our own perspectives onto them?
This question has been central to a series of workshops I began developing and delivering in 2018 called 'Using Phenomenology in Contemporary Arts Research and Pedagogy'. In this paper, I present the philosophical underpinnings for the "interviewing images" methodology and report on the techniques involved. In particular, I focus on what workshop participants have found to be its decolonising potential. For purposes of demonstration, I draw on my use of this technique in early-stage research for a small-scale community-based urban development project I am hoping to initiate in the underprivileged area of the city where I live and teach.
Keywords: Interviewing images, Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), visual research, image-analysis, decolonising orientations, change-making

Figure 1 Area outside of The Waldron Centre, Amersham Vale, London SE14, 2020. Photograph: J. Andrews

1. INTRODUCTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL, IMAGE-BASED APPROACH TO RESEARCH DESIGN

In this paper, I will present an image-based methodology that is particularly valuable in the early stages of research design due to its balance of openness and rigor. Adapted from a recently developed qualitative process known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (hereafter IPA), it can be used across disciplines but notable, in my view, are its contributions to projects concerned with *hospitable* forms of change-making, a notion I will define shortly and return to repeatedly. For the purposes of

… consistently open up unanticipated capacity and agency so that bit by bit, collective, consensual change-making can take place—from the bottom up. I like to refer to this as "thinking" or "strategizing from below." In these scenarios it is as if Merleau-Ponty's extraordinary notations in 'For an Ontology of the Perceived World' from the *Institution and Passivity* lectures, come alive:

> We live in intersubjectivity, a world with several compossible entrances; we are one for the others. Me-others hinge, which is common life, like me-my body hinge, which for me *is not just weight, a curse, but also my flywheel*. *Accompany* others, history, and not just endow it with sense by decision.[1]

At this point, I should add that *in* such scenarios of sought-for change, values always play a part, whether acknowledged or not. In her 2007 book *Merleau-Ponty and*

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[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'For an ontology of the perceived world,' *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collége de France* (1954-55), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010, 134. My emphasis.

Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism, the political theorist and new materialist thinker Diana Coole cites Merleau-Ponty's words in 'From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss,'[2] namely that "actual thinking moves back and forth between experience and intellectual construction or reconstruction". The intellectually and perceptually decolonising structures of phenomenological investigation and epoché only highlight this. As will be evident from the title of my paper, I'm interested in the forms of thought and action that may emerge if phenomenological commitments are brought into contact with values of an ethical, and indeed theological or faith-based nature. I used the word 'actuating' in my title to convey a hands-on sense of seeking points of connection between these different commitments and efforts, ways in which they might gear into each other. To actuate means to put into action, as with a machine. This machinic reference, of course, returns me to Merleau-Ponty's uses of pivot (and hinge) in his writing. It also leads me into the extra-Merleau-Pontean terrain of virtue ethics, notably where this pertains to the workings of the [old fashioned?] cardinal virtues (from the Latin *cardo* meaning hinge).

The cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance—figured as female) are conventionally so named because they are regarded as the foundational virtues of *natural* morality upon which all the other virtues hang. But I particularly like to think of the characteristics they embody as offering turning points into previously unavailable terrain. Here, I should add that, usefully, a crossing of phenomenology and virtue ethics is also explored in Irene McMullin's 2019 book *Existential Flourishing: A Phenomenology of the Virtues*. Clearly, a close reading of her book will be important for my project.[3]

Having made these initial remarks, let me now turn more directly to the idea of a grace-filled politics. When I mentioned this conception to a friend recently, she laughed, describing it as a contradiction in terms. She is certainly correct if our model of politics is that of the polarized and polarizing party politics we are so familiar with. But what if we are reaching for a different understanding of politics as those efforts, large and small, that seek to work in the public realm for the common good?

In what follows therefore I will first examine ways in which the movement and workings of grace have been characterised and raise some general problems that a grace-filled politics would need to address.

I will then consider what I take to be profoundly grace-filled aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thought, and what might be learned from them, even though—as far as I am aware—'grace' is not a term that features in his writing.[4] To this end, I will reflect on key aspects of a transcribed interview from 1958 titled 'On Madagascar'.[5] I have chosen this text for three reasons. First, it addresses issues of extreme urgency and difficulty that arose as mid-twentieth-century French colonial politics and African autonomist

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[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1964, 119
[3] McMullin names Justice, Patience, Modesty and Courage as her four key virtues.
[4] Despite the sometimes-sacramental nature of his metaphors, my understanding is that where religion was concerned Merleau-Ponty positioned himself as agnostic.
[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'On Madagascar', *Signs*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 328-336.

movements confronted one another. Secondly, it demonstrates the workings of Merleau-Ponty's non-dual, perceptually grounded thought at work within this environment, leading to nuanced analyses which he insists, nonetheless, can only offer partial truths. Thirdly, the interview, as a record of lived thought in process, also contains assertions which, then as now, have provoked not only critique but also censure. The text itself is a contested zone, and I haven't found it easy to engage with it. But as such, it has also offered me, as reader, the opportunity to approach it with precisely the grace-filled perceptual and interpretative orientations that I claim also to discover within it.

(In the style of) Tiziano Aspetti, Fortitude, possibly 18th century, Statuette, Bronze. Quaternary alloy, low zinc, with antimony, 19.5cm x 7.5cm x 6cm. V&A London.

Bambaia, Fortitude, Statuette, 1517-1522, marble (carved), 71.6cm x 30.2cm x 21cm. V&A London.

PART ONE: GRACE / GRACE-FILLED

It seems to me that distinctive qualities of perceptual energy and effort are embedded into, and generated by, practices that might be described as “grace-filled”. Let me begin with a pivotal experience of my own which occurred in the context of art making. It is what Layli Maparyan, professor of Africana Studies and pioneer in the field of Womanist Studies, has called a non-ordinary experience.

> I was eighteen years old, in my first year at art school. I had entered a life-drawing class and familiar anxiety was rising about the task ahead. I seemed to be perennially unable to represent the human body accurately, vividly and beautifully on paper. The challenge that day—and I was immediately conscious of the uncharitable thoughts flooding my mind—was heightened because our model was a naked, middle-aged woman with a lumpy, life-worn body. "My goodness," I thought, "where does she get the guts [the courage] to strip off like that in front of our young, scrutinizing eyes?"
>
> I was further dismayed when our tutor issued his instructions for what would be a hard-core, day-long drawing project using a medium I disliked: charcoal. The instructions sounded inhumane. "I want you to forget that you are looking at a person," he said. "Instead, focus exclusively on gradations of light and shade. That's it." I plunged in, nonetheless, and soon became so absorbed in the process that I lost all sense of time. When the class ended about seven hours later, I stepped back from the easel and, for the first time, looked critically at what I had drawn. I was shocked. Before me was a rendering of the model that was humming with veracity and life. I then looked back at the model, and I realised that *something* had changed. I saw her as beautiful. And as I continued to encounter her over the remaining days and months of my course, I *continued* to see her as beautiful and couldn't imagine how I had ever seen her otherwise.

Remarkably, it was by purposefully declining to 'capture' the model as the person she seemed at first sight to be, by descending into the pre-personal realms of appearance, and by attending to what might best be described as a specific, embodied orchestration of light, that her personhood came so powerfully to the fore. Here again, is that idea of "thinking from below"; thinking at what we might call a substructural level.

The transformative power of that experience feels as vivid today as it did then although at the time I regarded it as an exceptional, one-off occurrence. It wasn't until I discovered the writing of Merleau-Ponty years later that I encountered philosophical expressions analogous to those I'd experienced in that life drawing class. One such example, well-known to Merleau-Ponty scholars, would be his thinking-with a remark of Cézanne's about his approach to painting, in this instance a portrait of Victor Choquet, a minor government official and also an art collector and supporter of the Impressionists and of Cézanne: "If I paint all the little blues and all the little maroons, I capture and convey his glance".[6]

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project involved attempting to make experiences of this kind intellectually, socially and politically articulate, workable and strategic. As I will show later, I see this kind of non-dual, substructural thinking, when transferred into the realm of philosophical and political diagnosis, to be at work in 'On Madagascar'.

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[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cezanne's Doubt, Sense and Non-Sense, Northwestern University Press, 1964, 00 9-55, 16

Paul Cézanne, *Portrait of Victor Chocquet*, 1877, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 36.8 cm, Private Collection/Princeton University Art Museum

Grace has etymological roots in the Latin *gratus* meaning both pleasing and thankful (energies seemingly far from those activating most political initiatives, certainly as they are reported upon and debated). Dictionary definitions associate grace with "smoothness and elegance of movement," with "courteous good will," and (in Christian belief) with the free and unmerited favour of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings.[7] As a verb, it means to "bring honour or credit to (someone or something) by one's attendance or participation", to "dignify".

To these, I would like to add a further, mythic evocation of grace as referenced in an eighteenth-century philosophical text: the opening portion of Friedrich Schiller's 1793 essay 'On Grace and Dignity' – Schiller, of course, was among other things that great explorer of the notion of an aesthetic education as cultivating a kind of connective tissue of sensibility through which the otherwise disconnected realms of reason and of physical reality are able to communicate. In Schiller's words (referencing Homer's *Iliad*):

[7] See Ephesians 1: 7-8: "We have redemption (or reconciliation) in Him through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which he lavishes on us with all wisdom and understanding."

> The Greek myth attributes to the goddess of beauty a belt, possessed of the power to endow the one who wears it with grace, and to obtain love. This goddess is accompanied by the goddesses of grace, or the Graces.
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> The Greeks therefore distinguished grace and the Graces from beauty, for they expressed them by such attributes as were distinct from the goddess of beauty. All grace is beautiful, for the belt of grace is a property of the goddess of Cnidus; but not all that is beautiful is grace, for even without this belt, Venus remains what she is.
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> According to this very allegory, it is the goddess of beauty alone who wears and bestows the belt of grace; Juno, heaven's glorious goddess, must first borrow that belt from Venus, when she wants to charm Jupiter on Mount Ida. Thus majesty, even if a certain degree of beauty adorns it (undeniable in the case of Jupiter's wife) is, without grace, not certain to please, since it is not on account of her own charms, but the belt of Venus, that the high queen of the gods expects triumph over Jupiter's heart.
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> The goddess of beauty may, after all, part with her belt and transfer its power to one less beautiful. Grace is therefore not an exclusive prerogative of the beautiful; rather it can also pass, although only from the hand of the beautiful, over to the less beautiful, even to the not beautiful.

The workings of Grace in this text may of course be interpreted as having been recruited into a manipulative project: Juno must ensure that she "triumphs over Jupiter's heart". Alternatively, Juno's recruitment of Grace might indicate her humility: she knew that her own resources were not enough. But the key observation I wish to make is this: through the use of powerful symbolic imagery, the myth conveys Grace as a force for change that may be *bestowed* upon, and received into, all manner of persons and situations, including those that are initially perceived as not beautiful (or not as beautiful as they might be), so that they may become pleasing, even beloved, in the heart and mind of another. [Certainly, this occurred in the life drawing experience described earlier.] Indeed, the *economies* of Grace are significant here. In the Greek myth, Grace is such that it cannot be possessed by anyone other than the Goddess of Beauty. In the Christian account also—there are certain affinities here—the proprietor of Grace is God alone. For Schiller, I hasten to add, this capacity to receive grace from beauty was a matter of purely internal, human cultivation; in my own discussions of grace however, and as a non-dual thinker, I would also like to invite space for considerations of a theological nature. I'm interested in the realms of collaborative connection between the philosophical and the theological, the human and the divine. But in any case, what I want to underline at this stage, is how the issues of ownership and circulation are figured in the myth; the distributive model that is in play. The economist Jonathan Michie and the sociologist Linda Lobao insist that "ownership is central to how the economic system operates". [8] Furthermore, within dominant world

[8] Jonathan Michie, Linda Lobao, 'Ownership, control and economic outcomes', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, Volume 5, Issue 3, November 2012, Pages 307–324, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rss015. Accessed 15 October 2024.

systems, ownership, economics and politics tend to be fatally enmeshed. (This theme will re-occur shortly when 'On Madagascar' is discussed.) An intriguing question is how the intervention of the *cardinal virtues*, if practiced corporately as well as individually, might rebalance the injustices that are endemic in this terrain. There is also the question of what the application of *Grace*, as here defined, *and as distinguished from the cardinal virtues*, might additionally bring into play. Citing Simone Weil in *Gravity and Grace* of 1952, "All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity." This would include those associated with the Cardinal Virtues, since, to repeat, they are taken to have their source and home *within* that soul. But Grace, she continues, "is the *only* exception".[9] In other words, there is something radically other, something *un*natural, about the flows and circulations of Grace. It would seem to have the capacity of flying in the face of all manner of norms and odds.

I've now presented various interlinked definitions of Grace. Consequently, the idea of a *grace-filled* politics may now seem *all the more unlikely*! Certainly, to become workable, several habits of thought, various assumptions, would need to be relinquished and definite changes—enlargements—of heart alongside an expanded but riskier vision of what constitutes genuine sociability and cohabitation[10] would need to come to the fore in a way that is nonetheless envisaged as desirable and liveable. In particular, alongside challenges potentially associated with the counter-intuitive or non-natural circulations of Grace just described, a further key problem would need to be re-addressed: that of "the opponent" or "enemy." At issue here is how that enemy would need to be differently defined, diagnosed, positioned, and interacted with. By way of example, perhaps the most radical expression of such a reorientation is a theological one. It is encapsulated in the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, and uttered as a command, an expectation, and an ethos:

> "You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be [children] of your Father in Heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? […] And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing out of the ordinary?" (Matthew 5: 43-47a)

In the biblical account, these spoken words are infused with integrity since they were entirely embodied and acted upon by Jesus, who is explicitly positioned in the New Testament as God incarnate, the 'eternal' Logos made flesh. Their political context is also significant in that Jesus and his fellow Israelites were then living under the regimes of Roman—that is, enemy— Occupation.

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[9] Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace, 1952, The Anarchist Library, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/simone-weil-gravity-and-grace#toc2 Accessed on 17 October 2024. Emphasis mine.

[10] Along the lines of Merleau-Ponty's true rather false unities, elaborated as early on as the *Structure of Behaviour*.

Thus, a grace-filled sociality? A grace-filled politics, in the face of enmity, and in place of it? Is this possible beyond the pages of a holy book? Certain seeds of possibility—prompts towards shifts in perception, feeling, understanding, and action—are evident in the biblical text just cited. For Jesus (as exemplified in the well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan[11]), the term neighbour at its most meaningful (the 'good' neighbour) does not primarily refer to a 'natural' relationship between people who live in proximity, are in certain ways like one another, and probably have shared inclinations and goals. It refers to an 'attitudinal' and practical relationship grounded in mercy, in which the needs of another, even an enemy, are recognised and ministered to, regardless of prohibitive social, cultural, or other conventions. With this reconceptualization of the figure of the neighbour, a gap has suddenly narrowed, if not altogether disappeared, in what was first perceived as an opposition making space for descriptions, distinctions and interconnections of a more appropriately granular, idiosyncratic, and indeed surprising nature to emerge.

The recognition and alleviation of need—wherever and however it turns up—turns out to be pivotal here. This indicates that *once again* a new kind of economics is at issue, and as such, a new kind of politics. Indeed, in the Gospel passage we have just read reference is also made to the divine distribution of environmental goods—namely, the sun and rain that are required for life—in which God makes no distinction between those *we might call* "the deserving" and "the undeserving." I wonder how many of us, as we encounter these words, might not feel instinctively that the operation of Grace in this context is unfair?

But let me leave these theological ruminations to one side for now and consider how questions of grace, and the possibility of a grace-filled politics, might be accessed, at least in part, through a reading of Merleau-Ponty's 'On Madagascar,' a text I've already described as a zone of contention! Particularly, but not exclusively, relevant will be the definition of Grace cited earlier as *bringing " honour or credit to (someone or something) by one's attendance or participation", to "dignify"*.

PART TWO 'ON MADAGASCAR'

'On Madagascar' is one of the diverse texts included in the anthology *Signs*, which was published in 1960, a year before Merleau-Ponty's premature death. It transcribes interviews conducted between January and February 1958 and was eventually published in the Parisian news journal *L'Express* on 21 August of that year—although *L'Express* now describes itself as centre-right politically, when it was co-founded in 1953 by Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber (later president of the Radical Party) and Françoise Giroud (who had edited the fashion and lifestyle magazine *Elle* between 1946 and 1953, would become France's first minister of women's affairs in 1974, and minister of culture in 1976) it was left of centre and opposed to the Algerian War of Independence which by 1958 had been raging for four years.

[11] See: Luke 10:29–37.

In ‘On Madagascar’—despite its title—Merleau-Ponty was asked as “a philosopher and as a political thinker” *primarily* to present his opinion about the Algerian War. He was also invited to address broader questions of coloniality and decoloniality which were a matter of extreme urgency in the French political arena at the time. France had been involved in colonial warfare since the outbreak of the First Indochina War (known in Vietnam as the Anti-French Resistance War) in December 1946, when France was also undergoing complex and inevitably often traumatising processes of post-World War Two readjustment and rehabilitation, including *épuration*, at a domestic level.

[1] Merleau-Ponty would prove to be a well-chosen if (as indicated) a not uncontroversial interviewee due to his proven commitment as a phenomenologist to “stick to what is observable” (332) when shaping and testing his thought and presenting his analyses. It was for such reasons that by 1958 his own political views—which had been shaped very much by wartime experiences including life under enemy occupation—had undergone significant readjustment. During the 1950’s, Merleau-Ponty—previously sympathetic to Communism although never a party member—had publicly disavowed his affiliations with Communism and with Marxist revolutionary politics in the light of recent political events involving the USSR, and no longer saw this as a valid avenue for positive change. This change of mind and heart must have required fortitude. Certainly, it led to notable disagreements of an ideological nature with Jean-Paul Sartre and in 1952 Merleau-Ponty resigned as political editor of *Les Temps Modernes*, a role he had held since the journal’s inauguration in 1945. In any case, this meant that in this interview, Merleau-Ponty could be expected to present views that would sit outside of then-established orthodoxies not only, as was already the case, on the political right but also on the political left. This would indeed be the case. In France, on the left, the idea of revolution on the one hand, and the insistence that the French immediately depart from Africa on the other hand had arisen as two dominant anti-colonial positions. Merleau-Ponty’s observations would lead him to regard both as non-viable.

[2] “Sticking to what is observable” (332) is best achieved in the context of in-situ research. While Merleau-Ponty did not have first-hand experience in Algeria, he had travelled elsewhere in Africa, and it was as he engaged in varied contexts with the colonial-autonomist question that his key perspectives were forged. During the mid-1950’s, alongside his tenure as Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the Collège de France [1952-1961], he had accepted two commissions from the Alliance Française to visit Africa during the politically polarising and often violent contexts of African post-World War Two struggles for political independence. During October and November of 1955, he had visited Tunisia, French Equatorial Africa, the Belgian Congo and Kenya, where he also lectured on the concept of race, the psychology of colonialism and on questions of development drawing on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Octave Mannoni, and Georges Balandier.[12] Two years later, during October and November of 1957—thus just a few months before the ‘On Madagascar interviews—he had visited

[12] "The Meaning of Race", "Underdeveloped Peoples and the Philosophy of History" and "Psychology and Sociology of Colonisation" drawing on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Balandier (on economics of development) and Octave Mannoni.

Reunion Island, Mauritius and Madagascar, all located in the Indian Ocean east of Africa, with the intention of also observing at close hand the impact of French reforms to its policies regarding overseas governance. Madagascar, where he spent a month, was the scene of considerable tensions. The island had been subject to forms of French colonialism since the seventeenth century, with an inevitably turbulent history, Madagascar had only ten years earlier (in 1947) undergone an armed insurrection which was brutally suppressed by the French and led to around 11,000 direct casualties and hundreds of thousands of Malagasy people losing their lives in its aftermath due to starvation or illness. After the events of 1947, French prestige was at a low ebb. Subsequently, in 1956, the French had established reformed institutions under the Loi Cadre (Overseas Reform Act), but debate was rife in Madagascar, as it was in France, about how best to achieve independence.

It was *particularly* on the basis on his field trips that he rejected Communist and Marxist notions concerning the saving power of revolution in Africa. "It is clear', he stated, 'that a revolutionary politics cannot be maintained without its pivot, that is, proletarian power" (329). His travels in Africa had evidenced that no such proletariat and no such proletarian power existed. With respect to Madagascar, he noted that the ideas informing nationalist politics were radically heterogeneous. In his words:

> One is struck […] by the fact that the nationalist intellectuals of Tananarive are very far from what would make us assume a revolutionary conception of history. One of them said in my presence that the distinction between nobles and bourgeois was a permanent trait of Madagascan personality. Another one, that after independence it would be necessary to be concerned with keeping the population which is moving towards the cities in the villages. Still another, a Catholic, that it would be necessary to build a sort of feudal socialism. Another that Liberia was an example for all African peoples. Another, finally, that nothing was more important than the differences between Catholics and Protestants at Tananarive. (330)

For Merleau-Ponty it was clear that a revolutionary model of progress could not simply be superimposed over the radical variations of position within the nationalist camp—some of which were indebted to what he described as 'archaism' and others clearly the legacy of inherited colonial values, or values imported *alongside* colonial ones, at the level of "customs, ways of thinking, and even administrative practices" (332-33). To repeat, there was no proletariat here. But for many associated with the Communist Party of France, the idea of the possibility of an effective revolutionary politics remained dear; in Merleau-Ponty's words: "Many men who no longer believe that the USSR is such a proletarian power transfer the revolutionary ideology to colonised countries."

[3] Also crucial for the ongoing formation of Merleau-Ponty's thought—and this had been a general trait in his writing from the *Structure of Behaviour* onwards—was the situated, empirical research of others to which he attended with care. Where the colonial-decolonial question was concerned, he studied the work of sociologists,

economists and ethologists including Balandier, mentioned earlier, Alfred Sauvy, and Germaine Tillion. It was largely because of this work, which also included a good deal of statistical information, that he was led to disagree with "those [on the political Left] who believed that as a matter of principle white men had no business in the rest of the world; that they were wrong to go there; that their only duty and their only role at present is to get out …" (329). He did not want "Algeria, Black Africa, and Madagascar to become independent countries without delay" (334). Instead, he wanted "internally autonomous or federalist regimes immediately, as a transition towards independence, with calculated delays and stages." Some of his critics saw this as problematically colonialist but Merleau-Ponty's reasoning was based on economic factors. Based on the available data as interpreted by these scholars, he believed that a flourishing independence would be impossible in the countries then still part of France's overseas empire and interests, if significant problems of both underdevelopment and "accelerated development" (335) were not contended with. He believed that France had ongoing financial, economic and infrastructural responsibilities in this regard.

A general obstacle to a flourishing post-colonial independence in Africa was the tremendous imbalance at issue regarding the disposition of global resources. Balandier, in his 1956 paper *Le 'Tiers-Monde'* had reported that by the 1950's: "a tenth of the world's population disposed of 80% of its revenues" with two-thirds of the world's population then living in hunger." Merleau-Ponty cited that "a German, an Englishman, an American (and we can presumably add a Frenchman) in 1950 had five thousand units of energy a year at his disposal; an African or a Chinaman, one hundred and fifty; a Hindu or an Indonesian, less than one hundred" (333). Imbalances of this kind would need to be addressed, prudently and justly. [According to Concern Worldwide, although today's world produces enough food to feed all of its 8 billion people, 733 million people per day (1 in 11) go hungry.[13]]

Added to this were issues of high birth and mortality rates in the underdeveloped world (although medical intervention was lowering mortality rates at an impressive rate). For Tillion, an expert on the Algerian situation, the fundamental problems resided in what she called the *clochardisation* or pauperisation of "the underdeveloped populations" caused by the "decline of customary structures". Tillion, also a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps due to her work in the French Resistance, was a French ethnologist who had carried out four periods of field work in Algeria between 1934 and 1940 while working on her doctorate, a study of the Chaoui Berber people living in the Aures region of northeastern Algeria. During this time, she had built deep trust and forged enduring friendships among the Muslim population and as such, was well placed to return to Algeria in June 1954, with war imminent, to observe and analyse the situation. In 1956, she reported on her findings which were published in revised form by *Les Editions de Minuit* in 1957 under the title *Algeria in 1957*. But already in October 1955, with war already having broken out, she began to work with the anthropologist and Governor-General of Algeria Jacques Soustelle to ameliorate the driving problem of pauperisation she had identified. The strategy was to launch a network of 'Social Centres' with the purpose of making higher education and vocational

[13] https://www.concern.net/news/world-hunger-facts-figures

training available to rural populations, allowing them to survive in the cities to which great numbers were moving. Now we know, of course, that there have always been complex inter-relationships in play between colonialism and ethnology (just as with religion). Nonetheless, here a venture was being attempted in which French and Algerians were seeking to collaborate and in which—surely—to recall my earlier words, "attitudinal' and practical relationships grounded in mercy were being foregrounded, in which the needs of another, even an enemy, are recognised and ministered to, regardless of prohibitive social, cultural, or other conventions"—in this case, a context of armed conflict. These are orientations that I would associate with a grace-filled politics.

In the 'On Madagascar' interview, Merleau-Ponty had clearly aligned himself with Tillion's assertion that the principal cause of the conflict was pauperisation, and that this was the principal problem that needed to be addressed. As such, he regarded arguments for the immediate extraction of Europeans from Africa as a matter of principle to be ethically negligent.[14] In his words: "the countries overseas, if left to themselves, will run into great difficulties." For him, the position that "we do not have to worry about it […] it is up to them to face up to them and make whatever use they wish of a total freedom which must be granted them to begin with" (329), was not an option. On the contrary, he believed that there was vital work still to be done:

> Interviewer: You do not want France to withdraw from Africa. Can you specify your essential reasons for it?
>
> Merleau-Ponty: […] I think she [France] was able to and is still able to do some good there, and because I would rather be a part of a country which does something in history than a country which submits to it. At bottom, what annoys me in those of my fellows who speak to easily of independence is that the duties they propose for us are always abstentions" (336).

As it turned out, on October 14, 1958, just a few months after the publication of 'On Madagascar,' a Malagasy Republic was proclaimed as an autonomous state within the French Community. A period of provisional government ended with the adoption of a constitution in 1959 and full independence on June 26, 1960 (much faster I should think than Merleau-Ponty would have liked). While I don't have the scope to expand on this here, various internal revolutions and a coup did take place in later years and from the 1970's into the present regimes have been in place that have tended towards the non-democratic and despotic.[15] Poverty has continued to be a problem. In 2024, as reported in the latest BTI Transformation Index, Madagascar today falls into the

[14]In her later book France and Algeria: Complementary Enemies (published in French in 1960 and translated into English in 1961), while describing her clandestine meetings on July 4 and August 9th, 1957 with Algerian independence fighters (she later learned they included Saadi Yacef, leader of the National Liberation Front and Zohra Drif, who had carried out the infamous 9 June Casino bombing that was so pivotal to the Battle of Algiers) she presented herself to them "as neither a communist not a progressivist, but as a patriotic Frenchwoman", and reported that in that meeting Yacef was keen for his organisation to learn about her views on the problem of pauperisation and her belief that Algeria's inability to subsist without an economic symbiosis with France. Certainly, in the book, she referred several times, and favourably, I believe, to France's "Saharan dreams" and would seem to have wished these dreams to continue. She referred to "our [France's] good works and our wrongdoings, always closely combined (12-13).

[15] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13861843

category of low-human-development countries and retains its rank of 173rd out of 191 countries.)[16]

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I have found engaging with 'On Madagascar' to be an intriguing but messy business, and there is still much to research and think through. But for me, the important lessons I wish to draw from it have to do with the quality as well as the risks of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologically informed approach to observation and analysis. This led him to attend to the complexities and irreconcilabilities that are necessarily embedded in given states of affair, rather than evade them by using one or other ideology as an alibi. According to Merleau-Ponty's unnamed interviewer, this profoundly lived approach to political analysis meant that Merleau-Ponty was able to bring out problems [I quote] "that those who *think* about politics have not always seen" (334, emphasis mine). His priority seemed to be to extend his (and our) understandings of thought beyond the logics and deceptive clarity of dualistic or polarising structures (them or us/in or out, and so on). In his 2017 essay 'Merleau-Ponty in Madagascar,' Emmanuel Alloa has referred to Merleau-Ponty's "conceptions of polyrationality" in this regard, which also had the effect of continually testing and decentring his thought (119).[17] In this regard, Alloa also references a 1959 conversation with Georges Charbonnier for French Radio (RDF), in which Merleau-Ponty was asked about the "meaning that travel can have for an intellectual." Merleau-Ponty replied that it enabled above all "a test of thought, an exposure to otherness, which is part ethnographic experience. Thus," he continued, "the purpose of the trip, if there is one for the philosopher is to "criticize what is narrow, what is insufficient in his ideas." Along similar lines, Irene McMullin, in *Existential Flourishing*, writes that phenomenology "understands itself as tasked with negotiating the plurality and tension that existentialism describes" (6). She also associates this expanded capacity for perception and thought with the virtue of Justice. "Justice," she writes, "is the stance according to which one gives competing legitimate claims their due (4). From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, if such interrogations led more often to further questions than solutions, then so be it. Take Merleau-Ponty's immediate response to the interviewer's opening question: "As a philosopher and political thinker, do you have an opinion about the war in Algeria, and can you tell us what it is?"

> Merleau-Ponty: I have an opinion and I do not hide it. But it is perhaps no longer a solution […] Nothing proves that a given problem is soluble at any time whatsoever […] I see only partial truths" (328).[18]

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[16] BTI 2024 Madagascar Country Report: BTI 2024

[17] Emmanuel Alloa, (2017). Merleau-Ponty à Madagascar. [Merleau-Ponty in Madagascar: The Ordeal (or the test/testing) of the foreigner (or the foreign) and the decolonization of thought' published in *Chiasmi International* 19:115-128.

[18] See also the following regarding the problems that the interviewer saw Merleau-Ponty as identifying in the context of their conversation:

> Interviewer: But as inordinate as [these problems] seem to us, we cannot face up to them without envisaging a way of dealing with them, or of trying, in no matter how small a way, to keep them in check. Have you nothing to suggest?
> Merleau-Ponty: I must certainly suggest something, but this is no statement of an immediate solution (334).

Merleau-Ponty's thought in 'On Madagascar' aimed at nuance, and as much accuracy of diagnosis as he could muster. And indeed, subsequent history would confirm several of his prognoses. Nonetheless, there are places in 'On Madagascar' where his thinking displays a Eurocentric bias, certainly, I think, in terms of under-estimating the long-term and often invidious legacies left by a form of colonialism that he associated with the past and described as being "three-quarters over". I don't think we should be surprised to discover these biases; and based on Merleau-Ponty's record of self-positioning as a philosopher, as indicated above, I think, he would have welcomed their exposure.

Of particular significance to him—and I believe this attitude is of the highest importance for us today—was the need to prioritise and practice careful and extended *situated* looking accompanied by the willingness to relinquish what are taken to be truths when lived experience indicates otherwise. Recall for instance his statement in *The Visible and the Invisible* about the processes of illusion and the dissipation of illusions that are necessarily part of perceptual investigations: "I thought I saw on the sands a piece of wood polished by the sea, and *it was* a clayey rock. The break-up and the destruction of the first appearance do not authorise me to define henceforth the 'real' as a simple probable … The dis-illusion is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of *another evidence* … (VI, 40-41.) Such practices of non-entrenched perception and thought are vital for any viable politics.

A second, important lesson, alongside that capacity to attend to the poly-rational, was his capacity to dig down into what I've called the substructural. I will draw my presentation to a close with just one example drawn from 'On Madagascar'. At issue again are Merleau-Ponty's arguments against the immediate withdrawal of Europeans from Africa, using data drawn particularly from Tillion's book *Algeria in 1957*. In Merleau-Ponty's words:

> You will see in Germaine Tillion's book that out of 1,200,000 non-Moslems, there are in Algeria 19,000 in the strict sense, 7,000 of whom are poor people, 300 rich, and a dozen very rich. The remaining Frenchmen in Algeria are the salaried people, engineers, and businessmen who represent three-quarters of the country's economic infrastructure. During this time 400,000 Algerian workers are working in France and feeding 2 million Algerians in Algeria itself.

Regarding Madagascar, Merleau-Ponty reported that:

> Many Frenchmen, I should even say administrators, are openly or tacitly hostile to the colonial administration. One of them said to me: "We are teaching them to do without us." He was right. This is indeed the mission of French administrators under an internally autonomous regime. // But if it is a question of career, there is enough in this mission to fill a whole career: the task of teaching children and of training men is so great, and has been so long postponed (335).

The example relating to Algeria is particularly challenging. Merleau-Ponty (following Tillion) seemed to conclude from this that most French people in Algeria—the "salaried people, engineers, and businessmen who represent three-quarters of the country's economic infrastructure"—were *not* engaged in activities that upheld colonialism.

Surely, he is underplaying the long legacies of colonialism that have created this situation as well as the transmutations that colonialism is able to undergo to achieve its purposes in altering conditions. Or is Merleau-Ponty troubled by the ways in which the term ‘colonialism’ was then being used, that is, as somewhat of a blunt instrument that tended to ignore the multilayered specificities of interaction and attitude on the ground?

Nonetheless, by focusing on the roles that were being played, and the aspirations associated with them, a dominant political habit of thinking too easily in polarised terms, pitting black against white, or French against Algerian or Malagasy, was at least disrupted. This enabled richer forms of analysis to emerge highlighting the different forms and flows (economies) of affiliation and difference that diagnoses limited to inherited race-based designations (for instance) would have disavowed. It is here therefore that important associations can be found with the fundamental concerns of virtue ethics, namely questions of character and of the actions that derive from those characteristics. At issue for Merleau-Ponty, however imperfectly achieved, was the quest at once to observe, but also to get underneath given designations in order better to perceive the complexities of what is being said and shown and done.

CLOSING REMARKS

There are further aspects of ‘On Madagascar’ I would have liked to present, and much more on the broader topic of grace-filled politics. But let me end here with a final evocation which is again linked to that notion of sub-structural thought and what I take to be its strange potencies, especially when we find ourselves faced with social and political concerns that feel too big or too polarised to deal with.

Some years ago, I was walking home from work, rather tired. Suddenly an image entered my imagination. It was as if I was holding a microscopic key and searching for a microscopic keyhole. I found it, but to my great surprise, when I turned the key a door of enormous proportions swung open. This was a phenomenon located in the imagination, but that by no means diminishes it. Indeed, reflecting on it has brought me to the conclusion that a grace-filled politics might be best practiced by lots of us, in multiple idiosyncratic ways, at the level of the very small, and (given the importance, discussed above, of connected, in-situ forms of investigation), the physically nearby.

Where is the smallest and nearest scenario that might be trying to show itself to us right now? It might, or might not, be an obvious site of trouble.[19] What might happen if quite simply (but not necessarily without difficulty or effort) we began to attend to and

[19] This issue of attending carefully to that which may not at first sight appear to be troubled or contentious is important. A point that Merleau-Ponty made in his 1945 text ‘The War has taken Place’, and he also makes this point in ‘On Madagascar’ (328), is the importance of pre-emptive and preventative political approaches rather than retrospective and reactive ones. At issue was the importance of lived awareness and analysis of the present not only during periods and in places characterised by crisis, but also, and especially, in those that might at first appearance present themselves as being at peace. In ‘The War has taken place’ when he wrote about the devastating political consequences for France of an interwar intellectual climate in which the evidences of lived perception—the fact of encroaching German aggression, for instance—were consistently overshadowed by “optimistic” modes of thought conceived of as unambiguous and indubitable due to their problematically disembodied and historically un-situated character.

dignify it via perceptual means, and emphatically *without* thinking about possible solutions or remedies? In fact—my own experiences have shown this to be the case—might not the very fact of such grace-filled perceptual commitments already, in and of themselves, be inaugurating changes of which we are not yet aware, down there, in the depths. Perception of this kind, intercorporeal attentiveness of this kind, far from being a form of inaction or delay, is already an activism—an activator—of a different order.

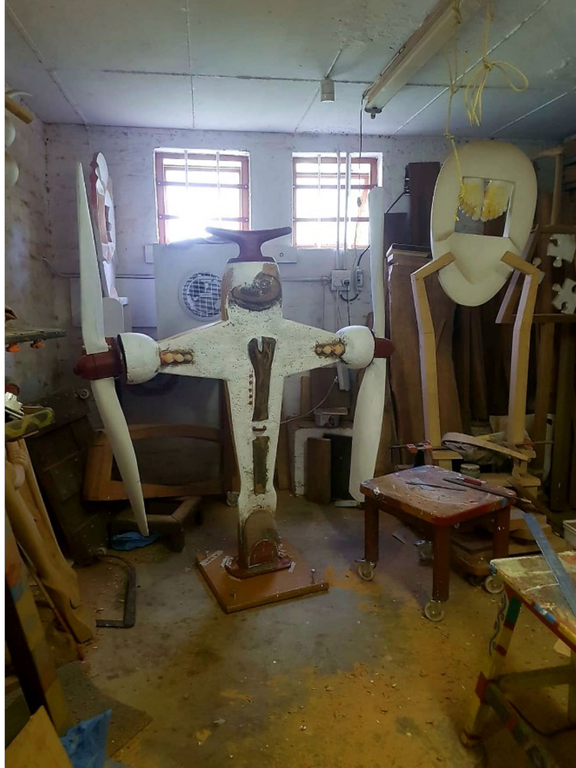
In the terrain of the substructural, strange keys may be found and strange pivot points discovered. In fact, I have brought a work of art with me which conveys these possibilities to me.

Gert Swart, *Jorella's 9 Findings*, 2019, jelutong wood.

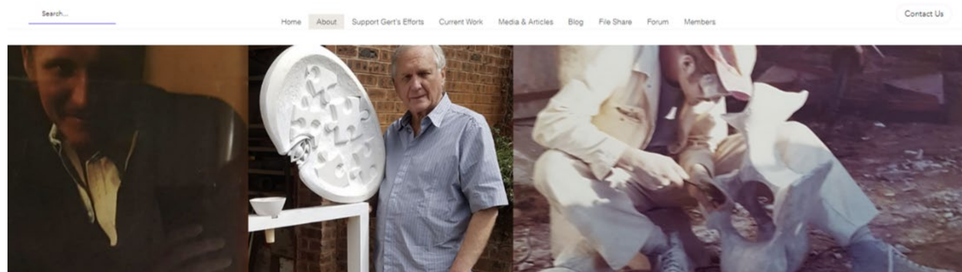
I usually keep them on my desk in a wooden tray and often hold them when I'm writing and thinking. They were gifted to me by Gert Swart, a South African sculptor who as a young man, decades ago, went through the process of seeking officially to relinquish his 'white' identity and privilege. Gert is currently working—in the resource-stripped South African art world—towards a major exhibition, *Towards Easter Sunday 2025: Who Am I?* A painter friend, Walter Hayn, and I are collaborating with Gert, and anyone else who wants to be involved, to create a participatory website, and to start producing and gathering texts and archives to support the show.

Gert has named these small objects "Findings," a term that usually refers to the clasps, links and rings that hold pieces of jewellery together and make them wearable. As I handle them, I have the sense that these key-like, hinge-like, pivot-like entities are quietly setting things in motion.

Gert Swart, Studio shot with *Propellor Cruciform*, October 2024.



Gert Swart



About Gert Swart

I am a sculptor from Pietermaritzburg in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Perhaps the best way to learn more about me is from 'Interview with Gert Swart,' an overview of my life and work that appeared in the October 2023 edition of *The Michelangelo Magazine* and is reproduced

Gert Swart

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Gert Swart, *Isandlwana Zulu Memorial, KwaZulu-Natal*, 1999, a commission from the KwaZulu Monuments Council to commemorate the Zulu warriors who died in the Battle of Isandlwana, 1879.