

AN AMBIGUOUS ATTITUDE.

Renewing Merleau-Ponty's Relationship with Visual Studies

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Abstract

Following the lead of early 20th century authors such as E. Husserl and H. Bergson, the works of M. Merleau-Ponty have always entertained the notion of reconstituting philosophical and scientific knowledge through a specific «attitude» in which the lines between the specificity of scientific thinking and the corporeal, perceptive, «living» thought would be increasingly blurred. The philosopher's attitude comes to designate a certain posture of the body. In this project, pictorial and cinematic images took on a reflexive role towards philosophical speech. However, the transversal spread of this «attitude» towards various scientific objects (social sciences, ethnology, neurology), has been perceived as a quiet failure as early as the early 70's. The contemporary field of Visual Studies appears as a shining exception, in which this philosophical project finds new life. In this article, I would follow the recent studies spanning the last decade (M. Carbone, L. Angelino, A-C. Dalmasso, P. Rodrigo,...), which have renewed the links between Merleau-Ponty and visual studies, and argue that his philosophical «attitude» could find a unique and particularly powerful validation when confronted to the study of the visual in its contemporary forms.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty; philosophy; visual studies; cinema; perception; body

Over the last few decades, the term «visual studies» has been used to designate an essentially polymorphic «field», which is defined as boundless in its choices of perspective and is unfettered by exclusive disciplinary and methodological choices. This polymorphic field has been known to emphasize its willingness to include various other fields, from social to medical sciences, via various arts, to philosophy. Philosophy has contributed its share of various conceptual and lexical «tools» to this vast project. Of these, the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty appear to us to be an obvious kindred spirit.

Following the lead of early 20th century authors such as Edmund Husserl and Henri Bergson, Merleau-Ponty's works have always entertained the notion of reconstituting philosophical knowledge by redefining it as an «attitude», in which the lines between scientific thinking and the ordinary, corporeal, perceptive, *living* thought are blurred. This «return» to the perceptive attitude of thinking and being is, of course, one of the main propositions of his life's work. In this setting, the «attitude» has to be understood not only as a series of conceptual settings defining an

intellectual standpoint, but also as a posture *of the body*. Phenomenology's new standpoint, as explored by Merleau-Ponty, is then defined as an «attitude» in the most «corporeal» sense of the word. His philosophical thinking claims to emanate from that specific perspective.

From *The structure of behavior* (1942)¹ to the unfinished publications and work notes of the late 1950s, his desire to reconcile a complex scientific approach and primitive corporeal being translated into an opening of the philosophical «field» to other approaches and tools of knowledge. His vocabulary in particular seems to have been integrated into the fields of film studies and aesthetics, sometimes without direct references to the author himself. As Emmanuel D'Alloa pointed out, this «attractive» vocabulary has partly taken precedence over his actual theories, although it arguably bears his «signature»²: «dimensionality, verticality, membrane, hinge, encroachment, (...), porosity,...».³

Today, the richness and limits of Merleau-Ponty's mode of interrogation is recognized as one of many influential currents in the philosophical field. The transversal spread of this «attitude» to various scientific subjects (social sciences, ethnology, neurology) is, however, perceived as a quiet failure. Although the author continued to vividly entertain it up to and including his last works, this mode of interrogation found more than one brilliant rebuttal in subsequent decades. Claude Lévi-Strauss,⁴ Gilles Deleuze, Christian Metz, Michel Henry, to name some of the most remarkable readers, have openly criticized the very intent of Merleau-Ponty's «transversal» opening to whatever lay «outside» philosophy. The central objection remains that despite this opening, philosophy keeps an upstream, privileged position in relation to other fields of knowledge, upon which it places a critical view. And the attempted reduction of phenomenology to an «attitude», by which the philosophers justify, in good will, this shared project is, in fact, only responding to phenomenology's internal crisis.

¹ The majority of the publications quoted in this article have unfortunately not been translated into English. Every translation offered here is an accurate, yet ultimately personal work, and by no means the product of an official publication. I sincerely hope to have done justice to the quoted authors.

² Xavier Tillet added «Interlace, chiasma, backcross, (...), reversion, winding, coupling, hiatus, dehiscence, bursting, fission, segregation». See X.Tillet, *Merleau-Ponty ou la mesure de l'homme*, Paris, Seghers, 1970, p. 114.

³ Emmanuel D'Alloa, *La résistance du sensible : Merleau-Ponty. Critique de la transparence*, Paris, Kimé, 2008, p. 96

⁴ Lévi-Strauss and Merleau-Ponty largely disagreed upon the concept that the latter in fact saw as a bridge between their respective fields, namely the works of Marcel Mauss. While Merleau-Ponty saw the possibility of a new conception of the links between corporeal and cultural being in these works, Lévi-Strauss dismissed such emblematic notions as «Mana», as he explained in his introduction to Mauss's, *Sociology and Anthropology*. (See M.Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, Paris, PUF/Quadrige, 2006, p. XLV).

The links between this opening and the specific question of the visual cannot be understated, as will be argued in this article. While his impact on ethnology, neurology, behavioural sciences and politics remains largely non-existent, in the last few years common ground has been found with the more philosophical spheres within visual and film studies. I will argue that his philosophical «attitude» might find a unique and particularly powerful validation when compared to the study of the visual in its contemporary forms with regard to some of these recent attempts to bridge the gap (M. Carbone, A-C. Dalmasso, P. Rodrigo, etc.).

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical «attitude»

Optimistic but insecure, driven yet indecisive. Merleau-Ponty's legacy bears the paradoxical nature of his «ambiguous» posture. *Ambiguity* is, of course, one of the key principles of his development of Husserlian phenomenology. This term first and foremost describes its «positioning»: a double refusal of both materialistic and idealistic traditions. This precarious positioning ripples through twenty years of work and is still, to this day, a cause of division over the pertinence of his project. At its core, the principle of ambiguity implies a philosophy that refuses to position itself in direct *contact* with the world it tries to understand, while also refusing to place itself *above* it. In this sense, ambiguity is the opposite of *transparency*, which would define the gaze of an incorporeal observer. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy binds itself to a corporeal standpoint, avows itself to be ambiguous, uncertain, its perspective askew and blurred, yet revitalized by the awareness of its own flaws.

Over recent decades, his most important commentators have openly discussed the problems emanating from this positioning. Etienne Bimbenet, in a joint publication musing on his legacy, describes these flaws with great lucidity. Merleau-Ponty's tendency to write in the future tense certainly adds an attractive factor to his works. But isn't it also a sign of «powerlessness» and of a «procrastinating» thinker who can produce nothing more than «promises» and «double negations»?⁵ Dominique Janicaud deemed his efforts «moving», «passionate», carried by «an unremitting desire for elucidation», yet incapable of overcoming its own «frailty».⁶

This conversation regarding the fundamental characteristics of his philosophy is, by any standard, legitimate. Jacques Derrida, in his published thesis *Le problème de la Genèse dans la*

⁵ E. Bimbenet, *Après Merleau-Ponty, Etudes sur la fécondité d'une pensée*, Paris, Vrin, 2012, p. 9.

⁶ Dominique Janicaud, *La phénoménologie dans tous ses états*, Paris, L'éclat, 1998, pp. 53-54.

philosophie de Husserl, «diagnosed» Husserl's philosophy with a profound need for «complication» embodied by its will to reconcile various opposites in its constitution. It «claims a renewed scientific objectivity for philosophy and return to the purity of concrete living».⁷ Phenomenology, he adds, builds on the mutual «contamination»⁸ of these opposites: the mundane and the transcendent, the active and the passive, the pure and the impure, the ideal and the empirical. The impossibility of achieving philosophy exclusively upon one or the other is the «flaw», as Jenny Slatman puts it⁹, through which this phenomenology gives philosophy new purpose.

Merleau-Ponty brought his own twist to this complex stance, especially in contrast to the later writings of Husserl, which paved the way for a transcendental phenomenology and an «essential» description of the world. I will quote Vivian Sobchak, who adeptly described this distancing:

«Specifically, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology departs from the transcendental phenomenology most associated with Edmund Husserl in that it stresses the embodied nature of human consciousness and views bodily existence as the original and originating material premise of sense and signification. We sit in a cinema, before a television set, or in front of a computer terminal not only as conscious beings, but also as carnal beings. Our vision is not abstracted from our bodies. Nor does what we see merely touch the surface of our eyes. Seeing images mediated and made visible by technological vision enables us not only to see technological images, but to see technologically.»¹⁰

Sobchak points out this crucial layer of complexity and ambiguity: the reinstatement of our bodily and perceptive nature as the core of our philosophical understanding. Hence the specific designation of his philosophy as an «attitude»: the expression of an *embodied* being, which is neither reduced to an ideal, incorporeal observer, nor to the behavioural patterns of a purely material being. The reconciliation, which I mentioned earlier, between scientific investigation and corporeal, ordinary attitude, has to be understood as a profoundly significant part of his project, as it stems from his desire to articulate various fields of science around a primitive and «ante-conceptual» form of thought. This return justifies the identification between the unique primitive process of living and the various processes of knowledge.

⁷ J. Derrida, *Le problème de la Genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl*, Paris, P.U.F., 1990, p. 75.

⁸ J. Derrida, *op.cit.*, p. VII.

⁹ See Jenny Slatman, *L'expression au-delà de la représentation*, Leuven/Paris, Peeters/Vrin, 2003, p. 27.

¹⁰ Vivian Sobchak, «The scene of the screen», in Andrew Utterson (ed.), *Technology and Culture. The Film Reader*, New York/London, Rutledge, 2005, p. 129.

The corporeal being which Merleau-Ponty is set upon describing is essentially *silent*, which is to say that it is *expressive*, but not cannot *be* fully expressed within the framework of verbal language. Ever since *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), his relationship with the written word as a philosophical and meaningful medium has been ambiguous and paradoxical to say the least. In the chapter on this subject in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, he states:

«Our view of man will remain superficial as long as we do not go back to this origin, as long as we do not find, underneath the noise of speech, the primordial silence, as long as we will not describe the gesture that breaks this silence».¹¹

As problematic as this growing retreat from the empirical might have proven to be, we must also keep in mind that it is, in fact, the condition for the opening of philosophy to the other, previously mentioned, fields of thought. The paradox of speech in which Merleau-Ponty has become mired is easy to show: the philosopher wishes to describe a world free from the categories and rules of verbal language, but has no other tools at his disposal to actually create this description. Most of all, he seeks to be free of language's referential function which, to him, imprisons any philosophical proposition into a reductive subject-object relationship.¹² When calling upon social sciences (sociology and structural ethnology) in the 1950s, most notably through the research of Marcel Mauss (on the body as a subject of techniques) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (on the structural interpretation of myths), his hope is to provide «fuel» for his phenomenological approach. In this sense, phenomenology becomes a strange but fascinating form of speech, not restricted to a field, a method or an object. As Yves Thierry stated in *Du corps parlant*:

«...having broken up with the 'natural attitude' by short-circuiting any possible positioning for transcendent existence, it opens up an infinite field of analyses that virtually solicits the theoretician. Indeed, there is no phenomenon which, freed from its attachment to a dogmatically imposed empirical world, does not constitute a donation of meaning to the phenomenological gaze.»¹³

This means that this particular philosophy has no purpose outside of other articulated attempts to understand the objects of the world. It is a speech *in the second degree*, which watches,

¹¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 224.

¹² As Renaud Barbaras has explained at length, the widespread and often brilliant use of metaphor in his vocabulary derives from this problematic relationship with language. See R. Barbaras, *Le tournant de l'expérience : recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris, Vrin, 1998, p. 268.

¹³ Y. Thierry, *Du corps parlant*, Bruxelles, Ouisia, 1985, pp. 12-13.

interprets and learns from other, more straightforward speeches, for which the very nature of verbal and referential language does not constitute a constant source of crisis. Gilbert Hottois explained it in similar terms:

«The sense of which the phenomenological speech talks about is entirely secondary, it derives from a “reflection” on traditional speeches; it is, I would say, as a first approximation, meta-linguistic and interdependent with classical denotative speeches for which the referential function does not cause trouble. We might say that phenomenological speech seems to feed off these speeches which it ‘criticises’ and that without the medium of this “criticism” we cannot see how “body”, “perception”, “other”, etc. might mean something in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking.»¹⁴

Gilbert Hottois’s remark is far from unfounded. As we know, even the corporeal and physical realities implicated in the primacy of perception are not described as empirical realities and references. When Merleau-Ponty speaks «from» an embodied standpoint, for which he became famous, it is never in direct reference to a specific empirical body. In fact ever since *The Phenomenology of Perception*, his writing style is often recognisable by his detailed first-person description of the corporeal experience. «This body» is neither fully assumed to be the author’s own self, nor a sum of variables and measures. And the reader is left to understand the attitude of «a» described body, which may or may not be his own.

The «second-hand» knowledge created by this phenomenology respects its own need to affirm itself as a simple «attitude» rather than as a rational and conceptual dispositive. By doing so, it justifies the need for «non-philosophy» within philosophy. It creates a delicate, precarious position for this philosophy which failed to spark a lasting enthusiasm within the scientific communities (linguistics, ethnology, sociology) it was trying to reach.

In contrast, the relationship built by the author between visual arts and philosophy, from «Cézanne’s doubt» (1945), up to and after *Eye and Mind* (1960), appears today to be a much more fruitful «cooperation» which has resulted in a real legacy, albeit a few decades later. In this dialogue, visual arts (almost exclusively modern painting and cinema)¹⁵ not only act as alternative

¹⁴ G. Hottois, «De l’objet de la phénoménologie ou la phénoménologie comme style», in A-T. Tymieniecka (dir.), Merleau-Ponty, *Le psychique et le corporel*, Paris, Aubier, 1988, p. 118.

¹⁵ Literature is also of great concern to him, and I will delve deeply into the matter in his second year at the Collège de France. See *Recherches sur l’usage littéraire du langage : cours au Collège de France : notes, 1953*, compiled by Benedetta Zaccarello and Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, annotations and foreword by Benedetta Zaccarello, Geneva, Métis Presses, 2013.

forms of «speech» in synergy with phenomenology's distance, but as *corporeal* acts of expression. This notion haunted Merleau-Ponty since *The Phenomenology of Perception*:

«...for the painter and the talking subject, the painting and the speech are not the illustration of an already-made thought, but the appropriation of this thought itself.»¹⁶

While the phenomenologist tries to discern this silent, formless act of expression within the «jungle» of language, the painter expresses it with his gesture on the canvas - a relationship which fits more easily with the notion of «attitude» in the sense of a certain configuration of the body within space. A lot has been said regarding Merleau-Ponty's near obsessive reference to Cézanne's works and over the last few years more has come to light about his lesser-known references to cinematographic images. This resurgence of moving images within the scope of his career has, of course, brought about a renewed comparison of these two mediums and, perhaps more interestingly, helped reshape the importance of the visual in his later works.

Attempting to redefine vision

The new philosophical «attitude» that Merleau-Ponty hopes to shape with the cooperation of visual arts, living and social sciences, aligns itself against the rigidity and the detachment of a «traditional» standpoint. As we mentioned, this «traditional» model is defined, in his eyes, by the clear-cut tension between subject and object, against which he wishes to assemble a «generation»¹⁷ of thinkers and creators. Paul Cézanne, Claude Lévi-Strauss or Jean Epstein appear as so many incarnations of an involved and expressive spectator, one that might replace the distant, external observer of «traditional science».

Visual expression plays a crucial role in this shift. As we mentioned, the phenomenologist himself remains deeply limited by his critical but flawed use of verbal language. This is where the visual, in a broad sense, comes to forefront of his philosophical project. There is a fundamental connection between the disciplinary transversality preached by Merleau-Ponty and the emergence, within his work, of the visual as plurality of object and as an independent form of thought and reflection. In fact, the redefinition of the visual and the act of vision stands today as one of the most fascinating and lasting reflections he has offered. As Isabel Matos Dias suggested, this redefinition of vision is perhaps one of the most significant signs of his «return» to the primitive being:

¹⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la Perception*, op.cit., p. 449.

¹⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 75

«...we must learn or relearn to see, unlearn what we have learned, make an *épochè* of the gaze and the vision already made and petrified by prejudice or by the cultural lenses that the viewer himself unknowingly wears. This means that our gaze and our vision are fabricated or artificial, more cultural than natural, and that we must naturalise vision to look beneath our habits.»¹⁸

Many have pointed out the narrowness of Merleau-Ponty's approach to the arts, most notably his tendency to reduce pictorial art almost exclusively to Cézanne. He does not seek to further our understanding of a tangible, historical field of expression. Nor does he attempt, as a purely «aesthetic» reflection would, to single out the specificity of visual art as a form and as an experience, in contrast to the rest of our mundane perceptions. Art is not exceptional in this sense. Its greatness, as opposed to the authority and complexity displayed by classical science and philosophy, comes from its ability to reveal the ordinary, the simple «attitude» of the corporeal being which other, more intricate forms of speech, had forgotten and hidden.

Yet his redefinition of the act of «seeing» goes beyond this articulation, especially as it contributed to his ontological «turn» in the late 1950s. In 1953, Merleau-Ponty gives his first lecture at the *Collège de France*, titled «The sensible world and the world of expression».¹⁹ The central goal of this course is to leave behind the separation between a «sensible» world (which would be the object of science) and an «expressive» world (which would be the object of philosophy and social sciences). A symptom of this division is the opposition between *meaning* and *movement*, which he had already denounced. The latter is particularly touched upon in regards to movement of the body, which Merleau-Ponty considered not only to be as meaningful as any words, but also to be the manifestation of the very origin of meaning:

«...as soon as we know how to move, as soon as we know how to look. These simple acts already contain the secret of the expressive act: I move my body without knowing which muscles, which nervous pathways must intervene, or where I should look for the instruments of this action, just as the artist shines his style into the very fibres of the matter he is working.»²⁰

¹⁸ Isabel Matos Dias, «La tâche visionnaire de la philosophie et de la peinture chez Merleau-Ponty » in *Phénoménologie et Esthétique, Actes du colloque tenu à l'Université Paris Val-De-Marne*, La Versanne, Encre Marine, 1998, p. 194

¹⁹ These notes were finally published in 2011. See reference below.

²⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 107

Philosophy, he states, needs to refute both conceptions: a purely objective and meaningless movement and a disembodied, purely intellectual act of meaning. Once again, this opposition fuels the disciplinary trench between sciences and philosophy.

Our author, as we know, plans for philosophy to reunite these two worlds and the various fields of knowledge that they include. To him, the key to this reunion lies in the erroneous opposition of the acts of *perception* and *signification*. Both, as he tries to demonstrate, should be reunited under the act of «expression», defined as: «*the property of a phenomenon which, by its internal arrangement, signifies another phenomenon, which isn't known and might never have been known*».²¹

There is something new in this early 1950s definition of «expression» which will greatly impact the place of «vision» within the author's ontological turn. As Emmanuel Kristensen put it, the real evolution here is the placing of a paradoxical structure of circularity and reversibility at the core of his philosophical investigations. The concept of «expression» puts this mechanism into action, so that «*the given meaning always exceeds the given itself and every phenomenon is lived as reflecting something other than itself*».²² This concept stands as a «configuration» for both perception and signification. And yes, it appears as deeply cinematic in itself, as the reader is quickly reminded of the author's brief venture into cinematic theory in 1946. In his speech, *Cinema and new psychologies*, he praised Poudovkine's famous experimentation with cinematic *montage*. Each frame heralds the next and each one is partially contained within the other. Meaning is thus constructed not by the presentation of isolated elements, but by their co-dependency. Each frame is expressive, not only by virtue of what it contains, but because of what it is missing.

The co-dependency of the present and the absent, the visible and the invisible, the said and the unsaid leads of course to the core of Merleau-Ponty's emergent ontology, as many readers will have guessed. The seen is also the unseen, the visible is also the invisible. And *vice versa*. Most importantly, *the perceptive body is also an object of perception*. This ambiguous double status of the living body breaks the tension between subject and object. And it represents the culmination of the reconciliation between the philosophical standpoint and the «attitude» of the mundane corporeal being.

²¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression. Cours au Collège de France. Notes, 1953*, E. de Saint Aubert and S. Kristensen (ed.), Geneva, Metis Presse, 2011, p. 15.

²² S. Kristensen, «Maurice Merleau-Ponty, une esthétique du mouvement», p. 3. (Online version: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-archives-de-philosophie-2006-1-p-123.htm>, consulted on 14 July 2015).

This notion of *reversibility* as the core of his ontology of «the flesh» has encountered its share of criticism, often deserved and partly derived from the same reproaches mentioned with regard to his relationship with science. The most vital target of these critics is not the principle of reversibility itself, although its more «poetic» formulations have come under justified criticism as well. The real problem, which continues to preoccupy his readers to this day, is the *expansion* of the «flesh». The «flesh» of the body becomes the «flesh» of the world:

«This means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is perceived) and that the world participates in this flesh of my body, it (the world) reflects it, it encroaches on it (the sensed is both the height of subjectivity and the height of materiality), they are in a state of transgression»²³

Much has been said about this attractive, yet arguably flawed concept of «flesh», one of the main issues being that the «configuration» of the flesh is expanded from the «attitude» of the perceptive body to the world itself. As critics and readers have suggested, while this theory does attempt to go beyond the phenomenological antagonism between subject and object, it might deprive the «attitude» of the philosophical body of any conflicting and *meaningful* interaction with the world.²⁴

Yet, in 1953, this configuration is exemplified by a series of specific experiences revolving around visual arts, by both painting and moving images. I do firmly believe that the depth and potential of this philosophical model, defined by notions of *ambiguity* and *reversibility*, finds a more promising development in its approach to visual forms than its expansion as an ontological pattern.

In his 1953 lessons he precisely defines the cinematic experience as a revelation of this reversibility. Moving images, as he suggests, exemplify the confusion between movement and meaning, as shown particularly by acceleration and slow-motion, through which movement itself becomes starkly charged with meaning.²⁵ Jean Epstein's *Intelligence of the Machine* (1946) is quoted several times on this subject, inducing several fascinating points of contact between the two

²³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 297.

²⁴ Many references could be integrated here. One of the most precise conceptual analyses of these flaws can be found in R. Barbaras' «Les trois sens de la chair, sur une impasse de l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty», in *Chiasmi international : Double anniversaire : Le centenaire de Merleau-Ponty, les dix ans de Chiasmi*, no. 10, Paris/Milan/Memphis, Vrin/Mimesis/Memphis University Press, 2008, p. 23.

²⁵ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression. Cours au Collège de France. Notes, 1953*, op.cit., pp. 116-117.

authors. Although these arguments and quotations regularly appear within these notes, they are only part of a larger demonstration that is not directed toward a comprehension of cinema itself. Yet in this specific instance, Merleau-Ponty refers to a body of thought - Epstein's later, more comprehensive works, which are known for the radical view they express regarding the cinematographic form of «thought».

Having used these images as recurrent arguments during his demonstration, he goes a step further in the last lessons of the year, in which he comes to define the cinematic image through the configuration of the absent and the present:

«Interaction of perspective and interaction of things-subject (by which only the first can be evoked). Extraordinary intense presence of that which is not explained: look towards... (horrible) spectacle that we do not see - when it is presented, its influence on the face's expression - therefore welding above the gaps, indirect presentation, i.e. designation of the absent by the present = interlacing of one with the other, pervasiveness of one within the other...»²⁶

The fundamental mechanism of Merleau-Ponty's later works, the reversibility between the seeing and the seen, is expressed by the observation of moving images in these notes. Their publication in 2011 revealed that the evolution of the corporeal being into the concept of «flesh» was conceived and expressed at a very early stage in cinematic and visual terms. The visual nature of the flesh itself was no secret, as the short, sometimes enigmatic *Eye and Mind* clearly indicated. In fact Merleau-Ponty had already formulated the circularity between the seeing and the seen in the form of the cinematographic experience:

«(2) I see a character in the back of a room, then the room, from his point of view, then I see him walk. Counterpoint to this point of view inside my own point of view. Going out, I do not recall these perspectives, instead it seems like I saw everyone living in a single space. But the selection has acted at every instant and it is the interaction of these perspectives that creates beauty.»²⁷

The implication I would like to point out in the context of this article is that the attempted redefinition of philosophy as the «attitude» of a mundane body shows a specific interest when coupled with the study of film and images. While it remained an arguably minor

²⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, op.cit., p. 169

²⁷ *Ibid.*

part of the author's investigation during his lifetime, I would argue that this project finds a meaningful expression in this specific field. And it stands in contrast to the awkward articulation between the philosopher's attitude and the scientific fields, who were asked to only partially share in this reduction. In fact, this reduction to the «attitude» of the body might be specifically pertinent to what researchers reflect on in film and visual theory experiments regarding their relationship with their subject.

Several contemporary readers have seen the promise of this lead and the possibilities it opened regarding later development of the author's work. Instead of expanding this complex relationship between the seeing and the seen and shaping it into an ontological theory, some have used it to *focus* on Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the visual in its cinematic forms. Among them, Vivian Sobchak stands as an obvious and essential precursor, and time has only confirmed her intuitions, the most central of these being that the experience of the cinematic screen might be exactly this circular relationship that he had imagined for all visible experience. The moving image is not a pure object of vision, it engages in a relationship with the spectator:

«What we perceive on the screen addresses us as the perception expressed by an anonymous but present "other". As we watch the expressive projection of "another's" experience, we also express our own perceptive experience».²⁸

For Sobchak this reversibility between the image and spectator forces us to discard the notion of «visible» when describing Merleau-Ponty's theories. Instead, the concept of *visual* should be put forward, to move past the closed relationship between the visible object and the seeing eye. Following Sobchak's lead, in her article «Voir selon l'écran»²⁹ Ana Caterina Dalmaso pointed out the strength required of Merleau-Ponty's tools against a theoretical tradition that would reduce the film to an object of vision and the experience of the spectator to a purely cognitive reception. Dalmaso insists on the lucidity and actuality of these tools when describing and understanding the place of images in our time.³⁰ With the invasive presence of screens in our lives, the emergence of tactile screens, our relationship to the screen has evolved in a direction that largely validates her suggestions: moving images and screens are no longer simple mirrors

²⁸ V. Sobchak «Le visuel et le visible : vers une phénoménologie de l'expérience filmique», in M. Carbone (dir.), *L'empreinte du visuel*, Geneva, Metis Presse, 2013, p. 85

²⁹ A.C. Dalmaso, «Voir selon l'écran» in M. Carbone (dir.), *L'empreinte du visuel*, op.cit.

³⁰ Two major joint publications, both directed by M. Carbone, have paved the way for this field of study and for this article in the past year: *L'empreinte du visuel* (op.cit.) and *Merleau-Ponty et l'esthétique aujourd'hui* (Milano/Udine, Mimesis/Chiasmi International, 2013).

through which we experience reality, but the frames by which we constitute and construct ourselves. This proposition is profoundly in line with Merleau-Ponty's ideas, which can now share in understanding the growing presence of the visual in every domain of our existence. Mauro Carbone, who has played a major role in the subject's re-emergence, brilliantly stated its potential role, exhorting us to realize «how much its main categories are involved in the deep transformations that cinema and post-cinematographical medias are currently introducing into our lives by influencing both the perception and the expression of our relationship with the world, as well as our personal and collective »³¹ Another fascinating entry in this recent field is *The Tactile Eye*³² by Jennifer Barker, following the specific «attitude» of Vivian Sobchak, among others. In this research the line between the spectator's physical experience and the theoretician's reflection is often removed. Jennifer Barker offers a radical take: she studies and describes most of the material aspects of the moving image (screen, machine, film) and translates it into «bodily» terms that relate to the spectator's own body: skin, muscles, bowels, etc.

«To apply Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh to film theory is to contest the notion of either an ideal spectator, who accepts a meaning that is already intended by the film, or an empirical spectator, for whom the meaning of the film is determined solely by personal, cultural and historical circumstances. Flesh insists on a spectator who is both at once, who joins the film in the act of making »³³

Over the course of *The Tactile Eye* the author's reflection includes not only the description of the spectator's experience, but offers a vast and original conception of cinema itself. The literary and metaphorical effort is extreme. But it represents one of the most radical applications of Merleau-Ponty's initial idea that the attitude of the embodied observer might overlap with philosophy and *in fine* build a complex theoretical reflection upon it.³⁴

But while Sobchak's demonstration's of Merleau-Ponty's input into film and visual studies is well known, the opposite statement is now gaining ground. Film and visual studies

³¹ M. Carbone, *L'empreinte du visuel*, op.cit., p. 10

³² J. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the cinematic experience*, University Press of California, 2009

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁴ J. Barker is not an isolated case. In fact, the questioning of the film and visual experience according to «embodiment» can be found in many other recent studies, such as L.U. Marks, *The Skin of the film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Duke University Press, 2000; S. Ahmed and J. Stacey (dir.), *Thinking through the skin*, Routledge, London, 2001 and of course V. Sobchak, *Carnal Thoughts, Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, University of California Press, 2004.

provide ground to rethink and understand his later works. By focusing his reversible model of the flesh and using it in the study of visual forms, the author provides a frame which goes directly against the explicit evolution of the author's work. As we saw, the epistemological transversality desired by Merleau-Ponty has always been determined by his essential subject of research: the silent configuration of the corporeal being. *Focusing* this configuration on the study of contemporary visual forms, without attaching this specific study to a wider understanding of the being, as he always has, does go against some of his fundamental principles.

It implies that the idea of a primitive and universal «attitude» does need to be nuanced and that we instead redirect its tools towards the study of localised and evolving media and methods of seeing. And it supposes that the very nature of the act of vision is determined by an ever-changing landscape of visual forms and media, which is itself more than ever determined by technological and social components. This is partly a «betrayal» of the author's quest for a silent, primitive being. But it might now be the key to safeguarding and fully developing the formidable redefinition of vision he left us. Should it come as a surprise? After all, both his openings towards other scientific fields and his major ontological developments have hardly passed the test of time, whereas his intuitions in the fields now explored by visual studies seems to find new life in recent years. The convocation of his ontology or his vocabulary in the polymorphic field of visual studies should not overlook this paradox and the likely necessity of this «betrayal». The various and heated debates surrounding this heterogeneous field of knowledge demand a heightened clarity regarding these multiple and virtually unlimited references. The case of Merleau-Ponty is no exception.

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