

# ONTOLOGY AND PAINTING

## *Merleau-Ponty's Eye and Mind and its relation to the ocular*

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In his essay 'Eye and Mind' Mikel Dufrenne suggests that there is an oculo-centric bias within Merleau-Ponty's work, not least in his writings on aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> Of Merleau-Ponty's famous last essay, *Eye and Mind*,<sup>2</sup> he writes: "In the end, there is still a final question concerning the title: eye, of course, but why not ear or hand for that matter?"<sup>3</sup> Doubtless, something like an oculo-centric bias could be shown to subtend Merleau-Ponty's work. One need only recall the titles of his books and articles, or list the artists that feature in them. But how are we to understand this dynamic?

Dufrenne, I think, is right not only to recognise that in *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty "wanted to bestow a radical privilege to the visual,"<sup>4</sup> granting it some level of intended significance, but also in the way he recognises this, emphasising that Merleau-Ponty's position seems to mark out a discontinuity between his early and mature works. He writes:

We have found in Merleau-Ponty the idea of a primitive Logos, as system of equivalences between elements of the

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<sup>1</sup>Dufrenne 1993, p. 261.

<sup>2</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1993a, from now on abbreviated to (EM).

<sup>3</sup>Dufrenne 1993, p. 261.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

visible. But this system of equivalences is also constituted between diverse sensorial registers, as *Phenomenology of Perception* has already indicated. Synaesthesias are the lot of all perception. [...] In order to remain close to this savage Logos, should Merleau-Ponty have written “the sensuous and mind”? In any case, what [Merleau-Ponty] says about the visible can also be said of the sonorous and the tactile.<sup>5</sup>

As Dufrenne explains in the passage above, in Merleau-Ponty's early thought, particularly that of *Phenomenology of Perception*, an undermining of sight's privilege already seems to be at work. What we find in *Phenomenology of Perception*, then, is an account of lived or embodied perception that seeks to address the phenomenon of synaesthesia—a bleeding of the senses into one register, or one body. Crucially, this “integrated core”<sup>6</sup> is seen by Merleau-Ponty as ontologically prior to the ‘scientific’ characterisation of the senses as discrete (in the mathematical sense) heterogeneous zones. “Synesthetic perception,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see [ . . . ] in order to deduce [ . . . ] what we are to see.”<sup>7</sup> In light of this, and in the final analysis, Dufrenne can only provide us with a speculative response to his original concern, writing, “I would willingly say that if Merleau-Ponty chose to write ‘eye’ and ‘mind,’ it is simply because he loved painting.”<sup>8</sup>

Beyond this, and by placing Merleau-Ponty's work in its historical context, this apparent fidelity to the visual is complicated even further. Heidegger showed, as early as 1927 in *Being and Time*, that since Parmenides the Western tradition has been “oriented primarily towards ‘seeing’ as a way of access to entities *and to Being*.”<sup>9</sup> Critically, and by extension of this analysis, Heidegger also implicates Husser-

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>6</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2007, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>8</sup>Dufrenne 1993, p. 261.

<sup>9</sup>Heidegger 1962, pp. 147/187,171/215.

lian phenomenology within that trajectory: within, that is, the ‘metaphysics of presence’. He writes; “the thesis that all cognition has ‘intuition’ as its goal, has the temporal meaning that all cognizing is making present.”<sup>10</sup> Which is to say, for Husserl—and philosophers of *consciousness* more broadly—the meaning of Being is still determined through the Greek notion of οὐσία (*ousia*, ‘constance in presence’),<sup>11</sup> and its correlative mode of access, sight. In light of this, and as part of any task of finding a philosophical basis to the “exorbitant privilege that [Merleau-Ponty] granted to vision,”<sup>12</sup> one must also address the *place*, the *significance*, and the *provenance* of the ocular as it features in philosophy itself.

In a certain respect, in this paper I do no more than mimic Dufrenne by following his original concern and trying to offer a response to it. However, in terms of approach my thesis is markedly different. Whilst I agree with Dufrenne’s emphasis on finding a philosophical basis of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘ocularcentric bias,’ I think that his reading threatens to overlook the singular significance of the ocular as it features in the essay *Eye and Mind*. In contrast, then, my thesis is not retrospective but *prospective*: my concern is not to address the (dis)continuity of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, by showing that what *Eye and Mind* says about the visible can also be said of the sonorous and the tactile, since it is linked to them. Neither is it to provide a developmental account of Merleau-Ponty’s thought and its relation to the visible. Instead, I seek to show that in *Eye and Mind* vision and painting are *intentionally* privileged—or rather, specifically addressed—for very particular, philosophical reasons.

So far as I understand it, in *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty is responding to one of the central philosophical problems of modernity:

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<sup>10</sup>Heidegger 1962, pp. 363n/498n xxiii.

<sup>11</sup>Sinclair 2007, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup>Dastur 1988, p. 18.

how the attempt to think the essence of transcendence issued into an *objectification* of both thought and experience. How, that is, modern philosophy has sought to determine our relation to the world (our very *being-in-the-world*) via the subordination of *aisthesis* to *noesis* ('eye' to 'mind'). Within this framework I want to show that vision and painting are discussed for two reasons. First, that the philosophy of reflection—specifically with Descartes—took “inspiration from the perspectival techniques of the Renaissance” (EM, p. 135) in accomplishing this subordination. Second, that by doing this, he was then able to reconstruct “the visible according to a model in thought” (EM, p. 130), able, that is, to give an account of transcendence that was grounded in the spontaneity of the *mind*.

To state it more formally, in this paper I shall read Merleau-Ponty as suggesting that with Descartes, modern philosophy comes about through an engagement with the ocular—in an attempt to think its peculiar virtue of “action at a distance” (EM, p. 131)—but, in the final analysis, forgets this dynamic when it submits *aisthesis* to the regime of *noesis* (that is, 'eye' to 'mind'), thereby occluding its own historical foundation from itself. In this sense—and providing my assessment of the situation is correct—I claim that *Eye and Mind* is genealogical in intent. It is because Dufrenne overlooks this dynamic that he is unable to reconcile Merleau-Ponty's earlier thought with the particular foregrounding of vision and painting that we find in *Eye and Mind*.

An upshot of this is a better understanding of Merleau-Ponty's late text *Eye and Mind*, specifically in its relation to his earlier work—in particular the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Though I approach this problem through Dufrenne's short essay 'Eye and Mind', the motivation, framing, and subsequent conclusions of this reading are by no means isolated.<sup>13</sup> By reading *Eye and Mind* positively—i.e. as expounding a positive philosophical position that jars with his earlier thought—Dufrenne does not offers us a critical perspective on how this late text re-appropriates the central problem of the *Phenomenology of Perception*—the relation of consciousness to the world—genealogically. Genealogy is an explicitly philosophical re-

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<sup>13</sup>See Matthews 2002, p. 148 and Gilmore 2006, p.292.

sponse to the mind–body problem. To believe that this problem can be solved in thought alone is itself the consequence of the separation of mind and body. In a similar manner to Dufrenne, Eric Matthews writes that in *Eye and Mind* “‘painting’ is called forth by Merleau-Ponty because it is the paradigm case of a relation to Being that is different to that of [Descartes].” Though not entirely inaccurate, Matthews also reads *Eye and Mind* positively, such that one can only see Merleau-Ponty’s relation to painting as a productive or pragmatic move; one that helps him to articulate a space, or opening, which exists outside of the Cartesian paradigm.

Both of these readings are ‘positivistic’ in the sense that they fail to see that, and consequently how, *Eye and Mind* is an attempt to lead modern philosophy back to its own presuppositions in preparation for a transformation, a *historical* self-overcoming. For me, the turn to painting in *Eye and Mind* is not intended to provide a regional ontology—a simple, yet constructive, description of the aesthetic experience—but rather offers a return to the technical and conceptual horizon at the inception of modern philosophy. I want to suggest that the privilege of the ocular in *Eye and Mind* can only be adequately understood in its ambiguous relation to Merleau-Ponty’s earlier work if we understand it as a leading-back, as a re-reduction of the inception of modern philosophy to its own *nonexplicit* pre-suppositions. I hope to show, with Francois Dastur, that Merleau-Ponty “while remaining the inheritor of the tradition” puts into question from within, “the nonexplicit presuppositions on which the tradition is founded.”<sup>14</sup>

## 1 Perspectiva Artificialis

In this section I want to address Merleau-Ponty’s claim that Descartes took “inspiration from the perspectival techniques of the Renaissance” (EM, p. 135)—from, that is, the technical practice of *perspectiva artificialis*. As Merleau-Ponty seeks to show, Descartes took this technique as being absolute—as offering an unimpeachable insight into the nature of the visible—and, consequently, offered us a

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<sup>14</sup>Dastur 1988, p. 40.

theoretical reconstruction of the visible that was based on its laws. What we need to understand, therefore, is not just how this technical operation functioned, but how it allowed for, and made possible, a certain determination of *aisthesis* (and its relation to *noesis*) that was then carried over by Descartes into his ontology.

[The artist] sees the tree nearby, then he directs his gaze further into the distance, to the road, before finally looking to the horizon; the apparent dimensions of the other objects change each time he stares at a different point. On the canvas, he arranges things such that what he represents is no more than a compromise between these various different visual impressions: he strives to find a common denominator to all these perceptions by rendering each object not with the size, colours and aspect it present when the painter fixes it in his gaze but rather with the conventional size and aspect that it would present in a gaze directed at a particular vanishing point on the horizon.<sup>15</sup>

In the passage above Merleau-Ponty gives an account of *perspectiva artificialis*. As he explains, in following this technique the artist arranges objects on the canvas along lines that run from himself towards a point on the horizon. It is by projecting these lines that he is able to open the canvas onto a space. However, these lines are not anchored by the artist's particular perspective; instead they are assimilated into a *geometrised projection*, a perspectiveless position that embraces them all. As a consequence of this, the space that the canvas opens onto is *partes extra partes*, a space that "remains absolutely in itself, everywhere equal to itself, homogenous" (EM, p. 137) and isotropic.

Having opened up this purely objective spatiality, then, the painter proceeds to arrange objects within it. But, crucially, the space is considered to be indifferent to the objects organised within it, and in

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<sup>15</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 51.

turn the objects are regarded as indifferent to it; or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, for classical painting “the form and content of the world do not mix.”<sup>16</sup> This space is one in which “things have a peaceful look, an air of respectful decency, which comes of their being held by a gaze fixed at infinity.”<sup>17</sup> Everything is in its place and things do not compete as rivals before vision, soliciting the eye. This is a space of simultaneous objects, apprehended by an absolute observer, who is not involved with any one of them. In short, it is a vision abstracted from its involvement in the world, a vision that takes place “without a body and without spatial position,” a vision, “in sum, [ . . . ] of the pure intellect.”<sup>18</sup>

Through its use of *perspectiva artificialis*, then, classical painting comes to “elevate certain properties of beings” (EM, p. 134). In the first instance it privileges the outline—or rather, the form—of an object against that of its colour. The colour of an object is reduced to a second order, because it does not directly pertain to the geometrical properties of the entity. Or, to the same point, the form of the object is privileged because it allows for a “network of relations between objects, such as would be seen by [ . . . ] a geometer looking over it” (EM, p. 138). It is the form of an object that allows it to be grasped by *perspectiva artificialis*.

Crucially, as Merleau-Ponty observes, for the Renaissance theoreticians this perspectival methodology was no mere ‘tool’—something that the painter could deploy should the occasion call for it. Instead, they sought to make this technique into the principal dynamic of *all* painting. Perspective was supposed “to bring an end to painting’s quest and history, to found once and for all an exact and infallible art of painting” (EM, p. 135). And if it could do this, it was because it was seen to be “capable in principle of founding an exact construction” (EM, p. 135) of the external world. Or, as Merleau-Ponty says elsewhere, if *perspectiva artificialis* was privileged to this extent, it was because the Renaissance theoreticians understood its formulas as being

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<sup>16</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

“taught [ . . . ] by Nature herself.”<sup>19</sup> Certainly, as Merleau-Ponty allows, there was a degree of bad faith in this enthusiasm. Not only might it be maintained that the painters realised through their experience “that no technique of perspective is an exact solution and that there is no projection of the existing world which respects it in all aspects and deserves to become the fundamental law of painting” (EM, p. 135), but the discovery of linear perspective was pursued along several different paths: “the Italians took the way of representing the object, but the Northern painters discovered and worked out the formal technique of *Hochraum*, *Nahraum* and *Schrägraum*” (EM, p. 135). The idea of perspective is, in actuality, more regulative than prescriptive—more the herald of further possibilities for painting than the final and absolute solution to its problems. It is this that Descartes forgets.

## 2 Descartes and Space

When speaking of Descartes’ indebtedness to the Renaissance theoreticians, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates some reticence, writing: “Descartes does not say much about painting, and one might think it unfair on our part to make so much of a few pages on engravings” (EM, p. 132). However, and despite this note of caution, he is clear about the nature of Descartes’ relationship to the practice of *perspectiva artificialis*.<sup>20</sup>

The very fact that [Descartes] speaks of painting only in passing is itself significant. Painting for him is not a central operation contributing to the definition of our access to Being; it is a mode or variant of thinking [ . . . ] It is significant, too, that when he speaks of pictures [tableaux] he takes line drawings as typical. (EM, p. 132)

As Merleau-Ponty explains, for Descartes painting bears little or no ontological power, it merely “causes us to see, without real ob-

<sup>19</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1993b, p. 84.

<sup>20</sup>We should note here, that the practice of *perspectiva artificialis* was historically prior to Descartes, and in was prevalent when he came to write his major works on natural philosophy. For a detailed analysis of the dates, regions, and reception of this technique, see Gombrich 1995.

jects, just as we see in everyday life” (EM, p. 133). In this sense we can already see how he is in accord with an understanding of painting that came to be held by the Renaissance theoreticians: bewitched by its capacity to give us a ‘true account’ of the world, the Renaissance theoreticians—as I have already intimated—believed that *perspectiva artificialis* had brought about the end of “painting’s quest and history” (EM, p. 135). Like them, Descartes believed that it was “capable in principle of founding an exact construction” (EM, p. 135) of the external world, and this is why its ‘laws’ must be assimilated into his project.

In a certain sense, it should come as no surprise that, as Merleau-Ponty claims in *Eye and Mind*, Descartes took “inspiration from the perspectival techniques of the Renaissance” (EM, p. 138). In the first of his *Meditations*, Descartes had already discounted the reliability of the senses: attentive scrutiny of my sense perception is, he claimed, sufficient to show me that the senses deceive, and that I must learn only to trust in the intellect. The famous example of the apprehension of the piece of wax shows that sensory properties cannot be considered to be constitutive of corporeal bodies, because these sensible attributes can change completely, and yet the identity of the object that subtends these changes can persist throughout the modifications and is not itself affected by them. From this, Descartes concludes that:

The nature of matter, or of body considered in general, does not consist in its being a thing that has hardness or weight, or colour, or any other sensible property, but simply its being a thing that has extension in length, breadth, and depth.<sup>21</sup>

Here Descartes claims that extension (*res extensa*), in length, breadth, and depth, is the essence of corporeal bodies. Thus, in a manner akin to the Renaissance theoreticians, Descartes not only maintains a distinction between the form and the content of objects, but also privileges form over and against content. The form of extension must be the real and unchanging essence of corporeal bodies, for this

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<sup>21</sup>Descartes 1959, p. 102.

property of being subsists throughout all changes, and is necessarily self-sufficient.

Like the perspective of the Classical painters, from which it takes its inspiration, Cartesian space is not given to embodied vision, but is apprehended by thought. This is nowhere clearer than in the Cartesian reduction of the dimension of depth to the other two dimensions of height and breadth. The Cartesian conception of space is a conception of extension (*res extensa*). Admittedly, Descartes includes depth among the dimensions of extension. However, since extension itself is defined as being constituted by points, each of which “is, and is thought as being, right where it is—one here, another there” (EM, p. 134), extension is tantamount to height and breadth, which give themselves as a juxtaposition of simultaneous points. One might say that such a definition is, as Descartes no doubt knew, self-evident and indubitable, since both breadth and height belong to the object *itself*—its geometrical properties—whilst depth clearly does not belong to extended bodies themselves: it is the product of the observer’s accidental solidarity with bodies by dint of his being embodied. Depth reveals itself only through the encroachment of things on one another or upon themselves. Yet if things do encroach on one another, for the Cartesian this is, on the one hand, only because ‘they are outside of one another’, and on the other hand because, for the sensible observer, who is among them, the things in the foreground necessarily occlude those behind. In this sense, depth is something of an illusion, a point that is corroborated for Descartes by the ability of artists to recreate the experience of depth in two dimensions with the technique of perspective drawing.

In this sense, “orientation, polarity, envelopment are, in space, derived phenomena linked to my presence” (EM, p. 134). It is possible to be deceived by these aspects of presence, and to attribute them to things themselves; but grasped in “their positivity they are thoughts of mine and not attributes of things” (EM, p. 134). Consequently, I know that I see something in depth precisely because I am badly placed to see it as it is in *reality*, and that someone else, positioned to the side of me “or better, God, who is everywhere—could penetrate their hiding

place and see them openly deployed” (EM, p. 134).

In essence, then, Descartes’ derivation of his conception of space from the Renaissance artists provides him with a space over which an unsituated thought ranges freely. Cartesian space is a space that is surveyed by a thought from above, a thought that can determine the body’s limited point of view upon things because it knows how that body is itself situated among things. Thus Merleau-Ponty concludes:

The Cartesian situation is as follows. Everything we say and think of vision has to make a thought of it. When, for example, we wish to understand how we see the location of objects, we have no other recourse than to suppose the soul to be capable, knowing where the parts of its body are, of ‘transferring its attention from there’ to all the points of space that lie along the prolongation of its bodily members. (EM, p. 136)

The Cartesian conception of space, then, is the correlate of a vision that constructs what it sees—that is, a vision that sees in so far as it thinks what it sees, and refuses to abandon itself to the spectacle as it offers itself up to perception. It presents us with a world that thought can know, but to which it remains essentially indifferent, because it is uninvolved in it. In so far as the stuff of the world is reduced by this concept of space to mere extension—itsself conceived as *partes extra partes*, as the simple externality of subsisting points—it offers us a world that is purged of all ambiguity because it is purged of any force, resistance, or activity. Such a world, reduced to extension, is a world of certainty, a world with which thought can reckon, calculate, or exert its mathematical mastery over, insofar as it is essentially lifeless and inert. In short, it is a world that, arrayed before thought, is prepared for the grasp of the calculative rationality of the modern sciences that “manipulate things and give up living in them [. . . which make] constructs of things” and “whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general—as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our ingenious schemes” (EM, p. 121).

### 3 Descartes and Vision

In this part of the essay I want to draw attention to how Descartes' incorporation of *perspectiva artificialis* within his ontology finally led him to re-appropriate *actual* vision according to the metaphor of touch. For Descartes—or even the 'philosophy of reflection' in general—the human reality of 'being-in-the-world' is conceived as a compound phenomenon: a synthesis of categorially distinct elements, namely, body and mind. As a function of this compound, sense perception is understood to be the product of an extrinsic interaction between the two constitutively independent substances. Here, then, sense experience (*le Sentir*) is conceived as that medium which accomplishes the subject's primordial contact with the world. But, crucially, this connection is not a lived or vital connection; rather, it is envisaged as the product of a quasi-mechanical, passive interaction between two discrete bodies.

As Merleau-Ponty acknowledges in *Eye and Mind*, this formulation of sense experience (*le Sentir*) "is modeled after the sense of touch" (EM, p. 131)—that is, an action by contact: a coinciding of the phenomenal body with the world. However, such an appropriation is contingent upon the view that the human body is 'in' the world like an object; that is, the pre-condition of sense experience *per se* is the 'co-existence' of the human body and the world. But furthermore, in order to articulate the condition of sense experience in terms of 'co-existence', the body itself must be apprehended as a thing in-itself, present-at-hand within a 'global locality'. For Classical thought, sense experience (*le Sentir*) is inert, and the perceiving body literally a corpse that is moved by the mechanical action of external things upon it. Both the spectacle and the spectator (*kosmothereos*), conceived as external to one another, are thought in such a way that they are effectively inanimate, lacking any vital significance.

Consequently, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, "here the body is no longer the means of vision and touch, but their depository" (EM, p. 132). For Descartes, then, sense experience (*le Sentir*) is understood as being occasioned 'within' the body (*res extensa*). For it to be rendered

intelligible—and thus perceptible—it must then be assimilated into an order of thought, so as to be apperceived by the intellect (*res cogitans*). Thus, as Merleau-Ponty explicates further, for the philosophy of reflection, objects are not perceived as mediated through the senses; rather the mind itself constructs the visible as an order of thought. The body itself loses its primary ability and possibility, its *actio in distans*, for it is this ability and possibility that is nothing other than the *ground* of what Descartes mistakenly takes to be an attribute of the mind—its transcendence.

For Descartes, then, objects and ideas are not perceived through the senses, but exist with the same necessity as the *cogito*—*because they are part of it*. It is not the eyes that see, but the mind itself. And if Descartes was able to claim this—if, that is, he was able to ground philosophy in a self-sufficient ego, if he was able to give an account of human transcendence by grounding it in this *ego*—it is because he ‘took inspiration’ from the techniques of the Renaissance. These techniques, which I have already discussed, were able to construct a ‘true’ representation of the visible (or ‘external’ world) according to the indubitable laws of geometry. However, and in exchange for this mastery, the Renaissance theoreticians, and Descartes with them, were obliged to subordinate *aisthesis* (the ‘content’ of the world) because it did not directly pertain to the world according to geometry.

Merleau-Ponty does not claim, however, that the metaphor of sight is unwarranted, that there is an ocularcentric bias to modernity, and that, consequently, we should instead think in terms of a more “tactile” or “corporeal,” that is to say, pragmatic relation to the world. Rather, he suggests that modernity has always already determined the very idea of sight, of seeing with the eyes, through the *metaphor of touch*—by way, that is, of the *Begriff*. Thus Merleau-Ponty is here in accord with Heidegger’s account of metaphysics as that way of thinking that is too abstract because it tries too hard to be concrete; as that thinking that determines Being by way of its understanding of beings. It is, then, the very prevalence of the metaphor of *thought as vision* that hides the reduction of vision to the mastery of touch.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>It is worth remembering, here, that in *The Visible and The Invisible* Merleau-Ponty articulates a struc-

Descartes' fateful error, then, was not so much in taking inspiration from the techniques of painting and drawing, but rather in treating these techniques as being absolute, as if they offered an unimpeachable insight into the nature of vision. Descartes seeks to found a science that forgets its origin in painting and drawing—Art—by suppressing the intertwining of thought in sensuous experience. It is by means of this suppression that Descartes is able to found a self that experiences itself as a clear and distinct *a priori*, as the ground and possibility of all meaning.

What Merleau-Ponty finds in modern philosophical thought—in the “philosophy of reflection”—is the attempt to comprehend both what the world is and our relation to it through the separation of *aesthesis* from *noesis*, eye from mind, and their reconciliation under the rule of reason, so that what it represents is a theoretical appropriation of our lived experience, a methodological reconstruction based on, but disavowing, a “brute, existent world” (EM 160). For the philosophy of reflection, our experience, our contact with the world, must, and can only be presented as meaningful if it is rendered explicit and unambiguous—if, that is, it is grasped in the *form of a thought* of the world. That is to say the very possibility of meaning, the meaning

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tural identity between touch and vision. What grounds this identification is the notion of *reversibility*: the body's ability to be at once touched and touching, seen and seeing. In the simplest terms, what this analysis reveals is that the sensible is more fundamental than the division of *res extensa* and *res cogitans* ('subject-object' or 'eye-mind'), and that the body cannot be contained within this conceptual framework. Indeed, as Mark Hansen explains, the “body is the sensible itself—the sensible incarnated as sensible, that is, beyond the distinction between sensing and sensed” (Hansen 2005, p. 247).

The notion of reversibility, though, it is most clearly demonstrated by the sense of touch, does not impose a hierarchy upon the senses, or prove that the *lived-body* is constituted by tactile contact alone. Instead, “we must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement. [...] Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world” (VI 134).

So far as I understand it, this position is not at odds with what Merleau-Ponty says about touch and vision in *Eye and Mind*—quite the opposite. If, in *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty claims that the notion of touch contaminates our understanding of vision, this is not to deny their relation, but to show how Descartes, in his attempt to “know how [vision] happens” (EM 130), deploys a false analogy with the haptic that mutilates or reifies the actual experience of seeing. While Descartes can situate the sense of touch within the world (*res extensa*), he can only conceive of vision as taking place within the mind (*res cogitans*).

of meaning, has its condition in a thought in contact with itself, in thought's effort at an internal adequation.

Prior to this idea of thought in absolute possession of itself, Merleau-Ponty recovers an inherence of thought in the sensible, and, consequently, reconfigures the very meaning of *aesthesis* as such. The movement or the method of Merleau-Ponty's thinking is what he terms *hyperreflection*; a thinking that does not reduce itself to a mere consequence of, or simple effect of, a material given, as in the case of empiricism, but which unearths the ground of thinking in its factual enrootedness in the world. As Merleau-Ponty says, this hyperreflection is "what takes hold of me as I am in the act of forming the ideas of subject and object, and brings to light the source of these two ideas: it is reflection, not only in operation, but conscious of itself in operation" (VI 219). Stated formally, hyperreflection represents the overcoming of the *aporias* of the philosophy of reflection. Prima facie this movement of thought would appear to closely resemble the Hegelian sublation of the historical problems of transcendental philosophy. However, whereas Hegel overcomes the limitations of the Kantian critique in attempting to ground thought in and from itself—that is, as an absolute *noesis* that recovers the aesthetic as but an alienated moment of itself—Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, recovers an originary intertwining of *noesis* in *aisthesis*, in, that is, a logos of the perceived world.

#### 4 Conclusion: The Renewal of Philosophy

As I have tried to show here, the question of vision and of painting is not merely brought forth in *Eye and Mind* as one example amongst others of the subordination of *aisthesis* to *noesis*. Rather, it has a singular significance.

*First*, this question is the exemplary vehicle of this subordination in as much as it is the *eidōs*, the outwardly visible aspect that a thing offers to the eye, that becomes visible in the emphatic sense—the *idea*—and which finally re-appropriates actual vision as a confused version of itself, thus realising the independence of the world of thought from the world of perception.

*Second*, the determination of transcendence—the *arête* of the human being—by way of sight is valid in as much as it is the peculiar virtue of vision to “to show more than itself” (EM, p. 178). Sight is more than the passive reception of stimuli, of sensations, or data; it points beyond itself and brings us into a relation with ‘external’ being; it opens up a field of existence; it goes beyond the situation by means of its capacity to *express*. As Merleau-Ponty writes, it is “capable of leaping over distances, piercing into the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations—a meaning—in the inconceivable flatness of being [ . . . ] it possesses this world at a distance rather than being possessed by it.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus by reflecting on the nature of sight, Merleau-Ponty shows that modernity, which, with Kant, finally comes to determine the essence of the human being on the ground of its spatio-temporal intuition, had a certain validity insofar as it took inspiration from the nature of sight. And yet, in the end, modernity itself denied what it sought by reducing sight to a *pure mathematical intuition*. It did this by taking the perspectival techniques of the Renaissance as absolute—that is, believing that perception must come about in the *mind* because the visible pertains to the laws of geometry. This domination of the visible by the rational, or the determination of *aisthesis* by *noesis* is reductive because it gives us the visible abstracted from a specific point of view so as to arrive at a notion of the world which will be valid for all—a particularity, then, that becomes absolute by forgetting its origin in the flesh of the world.

If Dufrenne is unable to reconcile *Eye and Mind* with Merleau-Ponty’s earlier texts, it is because, I think, he fails to grasp how *Eye and Mind* is a return to and reformulation of the mind–body problem. This is necessary not merely in order to posit a possible solution, but to appropriate the problem genealogically. Genealogy here is itself the explicitly philosophical response to the mind-body problem. To believe that this problem can be solved in thought alone is itself the consequence of the separation of mind and body. So far as I understand it, in *Eye and Mind*, what Merleau-Ponty tries to do is replay

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<sup>23</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 67.

the foundational themes of modern philosophical thought, to grasp their meaning, their motivation, and thereby *destruct* that thought's purchase on reality.

The *Phenomenology of Perception* was already a destruction, a dismantling of the modern philosophical tradition (of, that is, *realism* and *idealism*). Yet it was naïve—or clumsy—to the extent that it was not yet properly historical. The naivety of the *Phenomenology of Perception* stems from its inability to see the productive forces—and the horizon of understanding—at the inception of modern philosophical thought. It is finally revealed, in *Eye and Mind*, that these are contained in the perspectival techniques of the Renaissance artists and theoreticians. Yet, if the *Phenomenology of Perception* is unable to see this, it is because, as Merleau-Ponty himself articulates, it begins “from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction” (VI 200) and not its historical genesis. Despite this, we should not think that *Eye and Mind* represents an abandonment of the earlier work; it gathers up, and preserves, the truth of what is expressed there, but on a deeper ontological register. In any event, what secures their continuity is Merleau-Ponty's enduring critique of modern philosophical thought; a thought which “manipulates things and gives up living in them” (EM 121); “a thinking which looks on from above” (EM 121); a philosophy that secured human transcendence only by abstracting it from the world.

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