

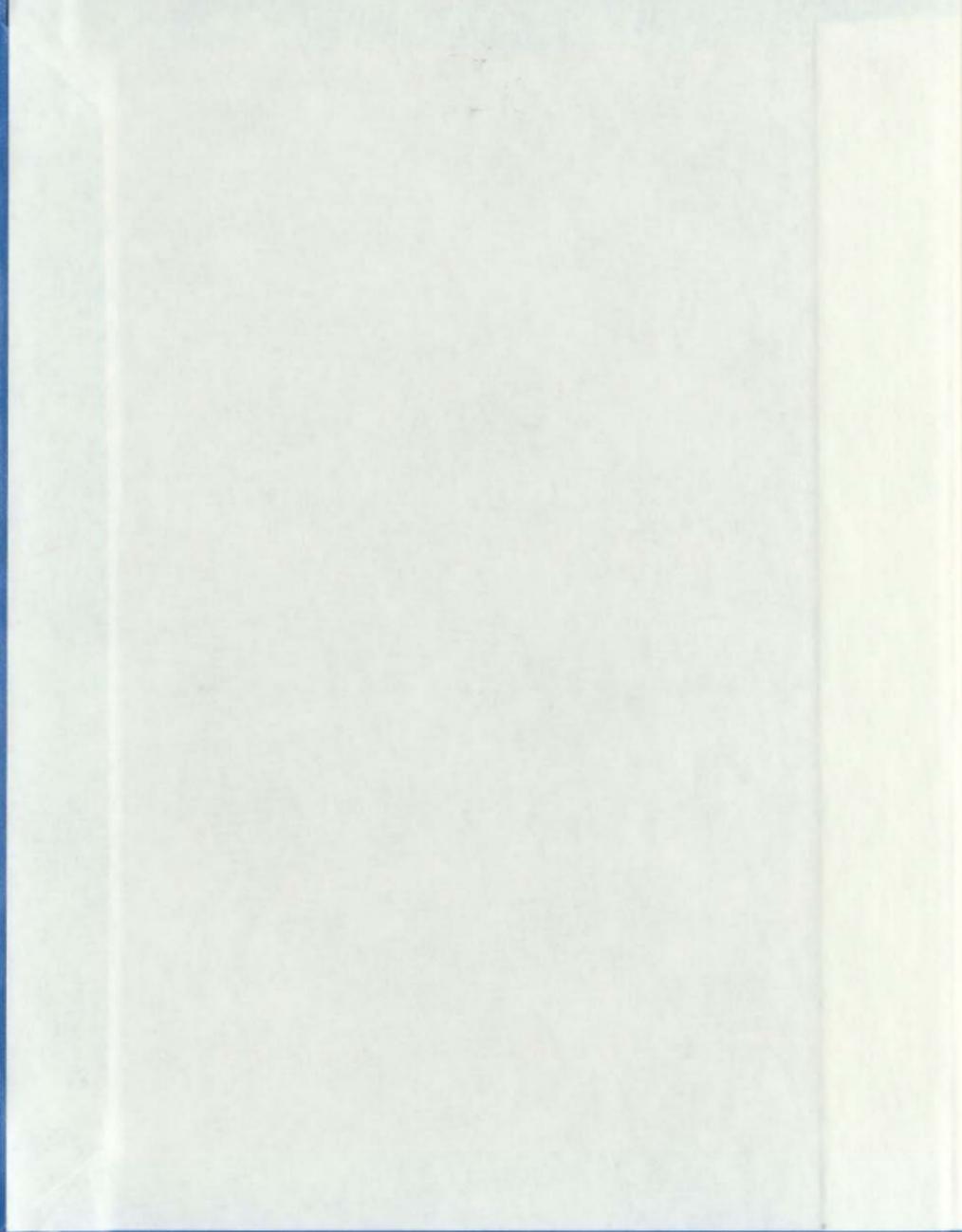
THE DARKNESS IN THE THEATRE:  
MERLEAU-PONTY AND FILM

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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The Darkness in the Theatre: Merleau-Ponty and Film

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the notion of the “virtual body” present in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, with particular attention paid to the *Phenomenology of Perception*. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not, as it is in empiricism and idealism, a simple transmitter of data for the mind. For Merleau-Ponty, the body must be seen as situated, that is, as a lived body. The complex lived structures of the body, i.e., its operative intentionality, memory, spatial and temporal orientation, all contribute to the way in which the body is the “ground” of reflexive understanding. That is, for Merleau-Ponty, the pre-reflexive, or the lived body - grounds the reflexive. The body figures in consciousness, and in understanding, in a developmental way. Rather than seeing consciousness and understanding as a formal “object positing” system, Merleau-Ponty maintains that it is relational and cannot be understood apart from its phenomenal field. Perception is the best expression of this relational structure, for when we perceive and understand objects, we carry forward all our bodily experience - Merleau-Ponty calls it the “body image”- and this allows for the concurrent working out and clarification of meaning. This body image, or virtual body, can be examined well through the film experience. So, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, we will look to film, for, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in “The Film and the New Psychology”: “[t]he movies are well suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other.”

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Dr. James Bradley for many interesting discussions on relationality and virtual distinctions. My sister Mary. My friends - especially Lisa Moore - for talking about what the body does in the theater.

I would like to thank Alex and Nicolas. Most of all, I would like to thank Peter.

## Text Key

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

### Books:

*The Phenomenology of Perception* (PP)

*Sense and Non-Sense* (SN)

*The Visible and the Invisible* (VI)

### Articles:

"The Primacy of Perception" (Primacy)

"Eye and Mind" (EM)

"Film and the New Psychology" (FNP)

"An Unpublished Text" (UT)

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## The Darkness in the Theater; Merleau-Ponty and Film

The body is the darkness in the theater that  
is needed to show up the performance. (PP 101)

### Introduction

What does the body do in the film theater? This is a seemingly simple question. The body sits in a rather uncomfortable chair. Our sense perception allows us “access” to the images on the screen and the sounds that surround us in the theater. Visual perception is, it will probably be said, the sense most stimulated in the cinema. The film is a celebration of vision when compared, for instance, to a text or a song. But though these statements have an element of truth to them, they do not convey the whole story of the body in the theater. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “the body is the darkness in the theater that is needed to show up the performance.” This paper will examine what this statement means for Merleau-Ponty, and in so doing, will, as Merleau-Ponty does, re-state the opening question: what does the *virtual* body do in the film theater? Or, to put it another way, how is the body central to understanding and meaning?

Merleau-Ponty maintains that the body is often envisioned within a faulty account of understanding. In this paper, we will explore how he conceives the relation between the body and understanding. To this end, we will begin by examining Merleau-Ponty's use of the notion 'representation', which is particularly prevalent in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Representation refers to the reduction of understanding to thought, where

thought refers to general and formal activity. A representational theory of understanding centralizes cognition, making memory, for instance, the retention of concepts or “psychic images.” Memory, for Merleau-Ponty, is also an expression of the body’s familiarity with objects. Understanding and meaning depend on this familiarity as their ground, thus they cannot be reduced to cognition. Merleau-Ponty instead maintains a theory of activity in which the body-world relation precedes the immobilization of experience in a cognition-object relation. The body’s relationship to objects is overlooked in a representational analysis, partially because the body is seen as one of the objects posited by cognition rather than part of a complex structure central to understanding. “Kant’s conclusion,” Merleau-Ponty maintains, “was that I am a consciousness which embraces and constitutes the world, and this reflective action caused him to overlook the phenomena of the body and that of the thing” (PP 303).

For Merleau-Ponty, the reduction of understanding to thought is strongly realized in *l’analyse reflexive*, or the idealist method of analysis. One implication of *l’analyse reflexive* is, due the preoccupation of exposing and delineating the subject’s essential nature as cognition, the subject is understood as purely reflexive. Looking at the *relation* between subject-object begins for *l’analyse reflexive* with the constituting subject. The representational model, a central aspect of *l’analyse reflexive*, makes experience and understanding purely self-reflexive. What happens in perception, which for Merleau-Ponty includes a complex body-world relation, is relegated to the realm of “the cognitive”. For Merleau-Ponty, this is a divisive approach to experience, and one which rests, in some ways, on the matter-form relation.

For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between subject and object cannot be seen in terms of a matter-form relation: the distinction between form and matter can no longer be given any ultimate value. Merleau-Ponty rejects the classical distinction between matter and form because he believes it reinforces the tendency to take the world as the collective matter which consciousness forms or gives meaning to in experience. Such a position, as it is very well put by Jan Van der Veken, results in a "realism of brute existence" and "an idealism of meaning" (Van der Veken, 322). For Merleau-Ponty, meaning emerges from the subject-object relation, i.e., the constantly unfolding activity of the body subject with the world. We experience the world from the vantage point of an embodied being. The necessity of such a perspective makes it impossible to reduce meaning to a constituting, cognitive subject.

I would like to draw an analogy with film to clarify what Merleau-Ponty means by "reflexive". Susan Sontag writes: "[i]t's impossible ever to penetrate behind the final veil and experience cinema unmediated by cinema" (Sontag, as quoted in Sobchack, 197). Cinema, in Sontag's view, can never be exposed for what it *is* prior to the mediation of cinematic images. The film is an event, an unfolding mediation, and thus, the film's meaning can neither precede nor follow it. The meaning of a film can never be added by the viewer, with little regard to the relation between the images, or the film's body. The relation between the images of a film is the pre-reflexive ground of any subsequent discussion. We try to articulate this relation using better or worse concepts.

Merleau-Ponty maintains that *the subject* can never be extracted from its perception. Perception, for Merleau-Ponty, includes the full range of the senses as they engage the world. In other words, perception, as an expression of what it means to be a subject, can never precede the subject. The attempt, by idealism or *l'analyse reflexive*, to approach experience through analyzing its conditions fails to recognize that the subject is always an expression of mediation, perception - for Merleau-Ponty - being one, if not the central, manifestation of this mediation. The purely "reflexive" subject necessarily precedes its own mediation with the world. Seeing the subject as purely or essentially reflexive, is the result of trying to see behind the "veil" of bodily perceptions, thereby eradicating them. Just as the body of the film *is* the film, and cannot be reduced, for example, to a camera-filmmaker relation, the body of the subject *is* the subject, not an afterthought of transcendental vision.

In *l'analyse reflexive* the full range and meaning of what it means to be a subject, which includes bodily existence, is reduced to cognition. This reduced subject does not have a body. The way the body contributes to understanding, the power or capability that results from the body's familiarity with objects, is unexplored. It is specifically this point that Merleau-Ponty seeks to explore by making perception primary.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty seeks to expound the relevance of perception as bodily, thereby overturning the reduction of understanding and experience to thought. Perception has, Merleau-Ponty contends, traditionally been aligned with the "higher order" functions of the subject, probably because we seem to have more control

over visual perception compared to other sense perception. The reflexive subject, abstracted from its body, is alone seen to retain a united experience of the world. Such an approach fails to account for the structure of experience. The body is a limit, a site, a perspective, a relationship with specific objects in the world (not simply red, rail, etc. but the sunset I watch from my balcony from a distance). At the same time, the body also affords what Merleau-Ponty calls the openness of Being. The body is open, a being-towards the world, not just a reflexive experience of the world, and as such, it is potent.

Visual art, and more particularly for our purposes here, film, offers a unique example of the body's activity. The film is unique not least in that it is a relationship in which meaning cannot easily be reduced to the subject's constitution. The film offers, in many respects, a new configuration of objects. More important is the format of film: it is a two dimensional moving image. In order to have a "three dimensional experience" of the images of the screen, in short, to understand what is happening in this newly configured space, the subject needs a body. But the body does not "need a body" in the sense that the subject is something above and beyond its body. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, the body never acts as a transmitter- it is part of the understanding process, as a power, a capability which reaches beyond materialist and idealist limitations. The cinema is a good place to see what the body's power is for Merleau-Ponty, for in the theater the body has a power that is not expressed by movement from place to place, or as a transmitter of the "given", but by the power afforded by the movement of the gaze, and the subsequent visual tactile unity that constitutes the power of the virtual body for Merleau-Ponty.

Thus, the use of film in relation to Merleau-Ponty is merited in that we can most readily see the ramifications of a virtual body in the cinema. For Merleau-Ponty - we will say somewhat mysteriously for now - the virtual body inhabits the screen. Any remnants of the "theater of the mind" are done away with. Instead, we encounter a theory in which "the body is the darkness in the theater that is needed to show up the performance". We will, in this paper, discuss how the body is needed as a central part of understanding. To this end film will be used in three ways: 1) as an experience (the relation between screen and viewer) 2) as an art form (the structure of the film) and, less so, 3) as an example (the situations and experiences encountered in the film).

In what follows, I will explore Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body's power or potential - a power which cannot be understood under the traditional acceptance of a mind - body dualism. Through virtuality, or, more specifically, the notion of a virtual body, Merleau-Ponty questions the traditional role of the body as material or, as is sometimes the case with visual perception, sense collapsed into cognition. The virtual captures how the body acts "at a distance", in such a way that the history of bodily experience - my unified visual-tactile history of the world - and the development of concepts, are carried forward and projected toward our present experience. The body is elevated by Merleau-Ponty to the level of understanding, in which memory, anticipation, desire, and consciousness in general are part of a complex system which has a complex bodily component.

I have divided my thesis into three chapters. Chapter One, "Movement, Time and the

Intentional Body”, will discuss Merleau-Ponty’s attitude toward the representationalist reduction of understanding to self-reflexivity. Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of representational thinking, and its centralizing of a cognitive, constituting subject, is revealed with his recurrent focus on “presence”. We will discuss the empiricist and idealist preoccupation, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, with the “origin” and certainty of concepts over situated existence. Merleau-Ponty maintains that understanding depends on the relation between body and world as they are mutually present in situated existence.

Chapter One gives a detailed description of the spatial and temporal implications of situated existence, and indicates how understanding and the body are related. For Merleau-Ponty the relation between the body and understanding manifests itself in the operative intentionality of the body. Thus, we will end Chapter One with a discussion of the operative intentionality of the body, and finally how operative intentionality relates to orientation. The relationship Merleau-Ponty formulates between intentionality and orientation articulates a new kind of action for the body in that oriented perception counts as action, and intentionality is not seen as reflexive deliberate actions but it includes, for Merleau-Ponty, an operative dimension. Because we cannot but see the body as a whole entity, the entire body acts in perception. We can look at perception as the unification of the image and movement, but the meaning of the image is not judged in relation to mental representations. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, the image-body relation always occurs in situated existence, and is the ground of reflexive thought. In Chapter One, we consider the idea that understanding has a bodily component. The bodily component is not as a transmitter separate from the higher functions of “the mind”. Rather, as

perception shows, the body has an intentional structure which, in a complex way, grounds reflexivity.

Chapter Two, "What Perception Is", will discuss Merleau-Ponty's integration of the visual and the tactile. He maintains that the tactile component of perception has either been overblown (i.e. The Cartesian model of vision is after the sense of touch in terms of physical contact) or reduced, i.e., as when sense is made into intellection, and visual perception is "inflated" to cognitive functioning. There is no union of the visual and the tactile, in short no unified bodily being. Part of the problem is that we root the tactile to the spot; we fail to see it in terms of possibility and, rather tether it to the surface of the body. By re-integrating the visual and the tactile, Merleau-Ponty gives the body back its power of potential; the tactile power of the body is not snuffed out when not in action in relation to a specific object. By maintaining that situated presence is an active part of visual perception, Merleau-Ponty overturns the idealist notion that I constitute the world (i.e., vision gives up a spectacle "spread out before me", and "I have the feeling of being immediately present everywhere and situated nowhere." (PP 15))

Merleau-Ponty's reintegrated unified body is captured by his notion of the "virtual". In Chapter Three, "Habit Gesture and the Acquisition of Meaning", we will discuss the significance of the body in relation to meaning. Meaning is related to bodily being, for Merleau-Ponty, through acquiring and developing what he calls habit. Habit "is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action" (PP 144) - that is, habit, as the acquisition

of meaning, is an expression of the body now *unified* with understanding. The "body image" is Merleau-Ponty's term for the unified history of experience, no longer the domain of only the mind through representational structure. Gesture, the contortions and subtle variations of bodily expression, is used by Merleau-Ponty to maintain that meaning is "directly" accessible in perception. That is, there is no intermediate representational structure, nor can sense perception be seen as a transmitter. Rather, the activity of the body-subject is relational in structure: we must look at the *relations* between subjects and others.

For Merleau-Ponty, meaning always emerges from the relationship between the subject and the given, but in a markedly different way than the Kantian given is present in l'analyse reflexive. There is no "raw" brute given world which precedes the human subject. Again, Merleau-Ponty makes the connection between meaning and the body with his notion of habit. Meaning emerges from non-constituting experience which is specific to the human body and to the situations we continually inhabit. Our experience of the gesture is a case in point, as is the film experience. The meaning of the gesture, the subtle contortion of the face in anger, for instance, is not something "found" prior to or behind the gesture; it is not a sign which we "really" experience through representation and reflection, but is the gesture itself. The angry gesture is present to us as anger. Similarly, the film "is" what it means: "The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything other than itself" (FNP 58). Thus, "the joy of art lies in its showing how something takes on meaning - not by referring to already established and

acquired ideas but by the temporal or spatial arrangements of elements" (FNP 58). This arrangement of elements is accomplished by what many philosophers are hesitant to afford or extend to our bodily being: a complex structure of understanding. Merleau-Ponty affords such a structure to the body, as we will see, not least in that he rejects the distinction between the reflexive and the non-reflexive.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the gesture resists the placing of meaning above and beyond the body-world relation. "The meaning of gesture is not behind it, it is intermingled with the structures of the world outlined by the gesture itself - as in perceptual experience, the significance of the fireplace does not lie beyond the perceptible spectacle, namely the fireplace itself as my eyes and movements discover the world" (*PP* 185-186). My eyes and movements do not discover the world as part of a higher representational structure of consciousness. Because meaning is a development and expression of prior experience (habit) which is also always new experience (in-habiting), it necessarily involves viewing understanding and the body as unified.

For Merleau-Ponty, we can only understand the body as a unity, as an ongoing integration of past and potential experience. The whole lived body is an intentional body, in that even when it is not in action, it can always be called to action. In this sense, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is virtual. In "The Virtual Body", the conclusion to this paper, I will discuss the virtual body in Merleau-Ponty's work, and how it contributes to his making the body an active part of understanding. Without the virtual aspect of the body's existence, we could never understand that which we have never precisely encountered

before, a power which is ingrained in the body's activity. That the body has this kind of potential for Merleau-Ponty is telling; such a view does not allow the body to be reduced as in scientific materialism, to a set of facts or states of affairs. While the body is limited by that which is open to it, that which forms its field of action, Merleau-Ponty extends the field of action, through perception, beyond the material: "the human body is defined in terms of its property of appropriating, in an indefinite series of continuous acts, significant cores which transcend and transfigure its natural powers" (PP 194). The body, in so far as it is a virtual body, resides in what Merleau-Ponty calls the "chiasm" between the rationalist poles of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, thereby rendering such polarity obsolete. Furthermore, the body cannot be reduced to the mental or the physical; it is neither as flesh or mind that we can understand perception.

## Chapter 1: Movement, Time and the Intentional Body

The movies are well suited to make manifest  
the union of mind and body, mind and world,  
and the expression of one in the other.

Merleau-Ponty, "Film and the New Psychology"

### 1.0 The Science of Representation and Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Presence

According to *l'analyse reflexive*, or, as Merleau-Ponty also calls it, intellectualism, the source of understanding is aligned with mental representation: recognition, memory: the realm of the psychic image. The body, beyond the role of a transmitter of data for the mind to cognize, is largely left out. Merleau-Ponty's work seeks to explore and destroy the traditionally accepted rift between the psychic image and the body found in leading philosophical notions of understanding, those that reduce or conflate the body to thought. He seeks to reintegrate the body and consciousness, the latter of which has been seen as, largely, opposed to the former. Once we get beyond looking at understanding through a representational model, we can return to the presence of the body, and how it contributes to understanding and meaning.

The subject as an agent of organization and constitution is present in empiricist and idealist theories of experience. Idealism traces experience back to its conditions. The meaning of perception is located in the subject, a subject that becomes the source for perception in so far as what is seen is experienced as meaningful in a purely reflective

manner. Empirical inquiry, in order to explain that we have a unified experience of the world of atomistic "impressions", creates faculties such as "association", which are purely interior forces. Accordingly, as impressions, mental representations of the object are broken down and reconfigured by the subject in understanding. In each case, that of idealism and empiricism, meaning is seen to arise from the representational powers of thought.

For both idealism and empiricism, the subject-object *relation* is replaced with an explanation of the subject's constitution of the world as meaningful. For Merleau-Ponty, this reductive immobilization of the precept partially stems from the Cartesian roots which both philosophical traditions share, roots which call for clarity and distinctness. In both cases certainty is the starting point of analysis. The need to *account* for the certainty of the data of perception prevails, even though these phenomena are, in the end, deemed outside the range of reason. Merleau-Ponty, conversely, embraces ambiguity as a central tenet of his philosophy. Activity cannot be exhausted by analysis, and, for Merleau-Ponty *activity*, namely the activity occurring between subjects and objects, is central. This activity has, as part of its structure, the bodily relation we have to objects. For Merleau-Ponty the relation between body subjects and objects in the world is where meaning arises. For this reason, we can say that Merleau-Ponty's is a philosophy of presence rather than of certainty.

As a philosophy of presence, the ongoing relation between subject and object is meaningless outside the situations that make it up. Being situated means being, among

other things, a body subject with tasks, etc. For Merleau-Ponty, the search for certainty inhibits understanding our total engagement with the world as situational. Merleau-Ponty sees the separation of certainty from the situated presence of the subject as a bypassing of the importance of our fund of bodily experience. This fund of bodily experience is integral to understanding.

Focusing on the idea of the lived structures of the body in the world, let us imagine a "cinema man", someone who grew up in the cinema. Even if he sat, from the moment of birth, chained in front of a film screen (like the denizens in Plato's cave), and experienced the chair filmatically, he would understand some things about the chair. He would no doubt understand the chair as something to sit on. He would probably recognize it if he were finally let outside. But while, in this scenario, a cinema man may have a minimal understanding of the chair (linguistically, psychologically, etc.) would he not, once outside the cinema, have problems "interacting" with it? Another example may help here. If a woman is born blind and miraculously becomes sighted, she does not immediately see the world as having visual continuity and meaning: she formally knew the world only through her other senses. Vision blinds her just as much as blindness did, in a different way. Dimension, depth, movement, space would blind the man born in Plato's cave or in the cinema. The blind man who has his sight restored cannot "see" what he touches while the cinema man would have problems touching what he sees. The shared problem is the lack of an integration of the senses, the lack of integration of vision and touch. This lack of integration will be explained in Chapter Two. For now, we understand that if the presence is limited to cognitive ability the result is a subject with no

field of action open to it. Let us look at another film scenario in order to better understand what a limited field of action could mean.

In Werner Herzog's *The Enigma of Kasper Hauser*, a child grows up in an "experimental" space, with no contact with anything but the hand that feeds him. When he gets out, he is unable to distinguish between objects that "move themselves" (like people) and those that are moved. At one point he believes that an orange is "running away" from him. Having had no unified experience between vision and touch, the patient, no matter how many times he has been *told* by his examiners, fails to understand what movement is. The authority of understanding has no merit if the body is not involved in it. In other words, without the integrated vision touch of the body subject, without taking the presence of the body into account, thought and movement become artificially separated. Merleau-Ponty seeks to refigure the relation between thought and movement in the lived subject and seeks to understand how meaning arises through the relation of body and world, rather than from their separation into transmitter (body) and organizer (mind).

Space, movement, depth, etc. are not representations to be used and recalled by cognition. They are bodily. "Movement is not thought about movement, and bodily space is not thought of or represented". (*PP* 137) Without a unified body presence one would be unable to live in a unified or coherent way outside the cinema. I would argue the same back again, that without a unified bodily history, one would be unable to watch a film. In other words, for Merleau-Ponty, the term "presence" denotes not the performance of

syntheses by a constituting subject, interacting with that which is “present to thought”, but *encountering* the world as a situation, being toward the world as a unified subject who has had projects, tasks, etc. Being present is being, as he calls it, “open” to the world. Thus, “the body is a system which is open to the world, and correlative with it”. (PP 143)

Being open to the world is being open to that which counts or has meaning for us. We will look more closely at Merleau-Ponty's notion of “counting” in Chapter Three. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of meaning can be seen in light of his dependence on Gestalt psychology and the centrality of the figure-background relation. Sensation, understood within the relation of a figure on a background, cannot be separated into qualities (red, warm, etc.), i.e., the treatment which sensation receives when it is reduced by analysis. “Once sensation is introduced as an element of knowledge” in this way,

... the red is not this warm color that I feel  
and live and lose myself in but it announces  
something else which it does not include ... It  
exercises a cognitive function. Henceforth the red  
is no longer merely there, it represents something  
for me, and what it represents is not possessed as  
a ‘real part’ of my perception, but only aimed at  
as an ‘intentional part’ (PP 13)

Under this analysis, my gaze “ranges over and dominates” the object (PP 13). Intention,

collapsed into cognition, aims at the object and in so doing “gives” it meaning.

Merleau-Ponty claims that the world is not by and large given meaning by us, by our intentions and constructions, (as the film image cannot be reduced to language structures as it is in semiotics, or subconscious memories as it is in psychoanalysis). Being in the world, the body “merges” with things and it is in this merging that meaning is expressed. Every perception expresses and re-enforces my open *connection* to the world. Being open is a mode not of cognition, then, but of being - and being in the world involves the body. “One’s own body is always the third term in the figure background structure.” (PP 101)

The significance of the figure-background structure, and how the body is the third term, can be approached as we contemplate what a Cartesian film theory would look like. What would happen if the thinking thing went to a movie in the extended world?

Under a Cartesian film theory, both the body and the screen would be considered extension, rather than an integrated part of understanding. With no distinction between the body as perspective and the screen as a site, there can be no projection of the spatio-temporal experience of the body onto its field of action. In fact there could be no “being-towards”, no relational structure whatsoever. Without relationality, without the projection of the ongoing meaning inherent in the body’s unified visual-tactile experience of the world, there could be no understanding of the relationship of a figure to its background, particularly for the film experience. The film is a two dimensional projected image. The figure-background relation of the film could not be translated into a

figure-background structure by a thinking thing. An integrated projection of tactile-visual experience fills in the third dimension of the film's figure-background structure. The body, the darkness in the theater, is essentially the background in every figure-background structure. Descartes' cogito could never go to the movies.

The cogito could never, in other words, be "present". Even though:

my consciousness would penetrate the perceptual  
world even to its most hidden articulations, the  
perceived world would not have the density of  
something present ... consciousness would not lose  
itself or become caught up. (PP 257)

The subject does become caught up in the world. In Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex is made to watch ultra violent films. He is unable to blink or look away because his eyes are propped open. He is completely overwhelmed by the images. Our eyes are not propped open at the cinema, we can look away, even though we often do not. We are engaged with the image. Even if we close our eyes we hear the world, we can touch it. Though the film experience serves well to exemplify the point, this "being caught up" is not reserved for the cinema. The density, what Merleau-Ponty also refers to as the "thickness" of the body and the world, is really the always meaningful unity of the body and the object in concrete interaction or living. We are not passive receptors of sensation, transmitters of sense for knowledge: "To experience a structure is not to receive it into oneself passively, it is to live it, to take it up" (PP 258). We are unable to

disengage ourselves from the sensible. But this inability to disengage ourselves is not a negative; we are simply and necessarily sensory beings. "A shadow passing or a creaking of branches have a meaning. Everywhere there are warnings with no one who issues them" (*PP* 290). We must refrain from "the natural attitude", that is, from recognizing the connections between understanding and the body only by *living* them, rather than trying, as Merleau-Ponty does, to describe these connections. We cannot, however, deny that we are caught up in perception.

The body, for Merleau-Ponty "is a power, not a thing known" (*PP* 138). The general negative claim of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is that both idealist and empiricist thought have taken reflective knowledge and consciousness to represent the entirety of meaning and experience. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the adherence to representationalist thinking is concerned with the products of analysis rather than lived experience. For both intellectualist psychology and idealist philosophy "all meaning was *ipso facto* an act of thought" of a "pure I" (*PP* 147). "As long as consciousness is understood as representation the only possible operations for it to perform are representations" (*PP* 139). Hence, cinema man's problem when trying to sit on a chair, and the thinking thing's problem with watching a film.

Merleau-Ponty advocates a move outside the Cartesian idea of consciousness as "thought wrapped up in itself" (*PP* 49) to what he calls a non-positing consciousness, meaning consciousness which is not in full possession of itself and its operations. Perception, accordingly, is an expression of the body's non-positing conscious understanding of the

world: "The perception of our own body and the perception of external things provides an example of non-positing consciousness" (PP 49). Before moving on to discuss perception more specifically, we must see how the body as a non-positing consciousness generally makes a contribution to experience and understanding. We will start, as Merleau-Ponty does, with movement.

### 1.1 The Science of Lived Experience: Movement

Merleau-Ponty proposes that "traditional views" are often based on a formula of movement which "dissects movement into a representation" (PP 138). "The project of movement is composed", after this dissection,

of the representation of its parts or its immediate aims: it is this representation that we have called the formula of movement. Praxis is torn asunder by representations and automatic actions. (PP 139)

We have established that neither the body nor understanding can be removed from the presence of situation. This situatedness includes things as seemingly simple as the distance between bodies and objects; "[d]istance springs into existence ahead of any science" (PP 51). The relationship of the body to distance is not an objective relationship but rather one which acquires significance and is constituted as it unfolds:

Just as there is no possibility of engaging in

any discussion on the 'conservation of recollections',  
but only of a certain way of seeing time which  
brings out the past as an inalienable dimension of  
consciousness, there is no problem of distance,  
distance being immediately visible provided we  
can find the living present in which it is  
constituted. (*PP* 266)

There are different ways that the body involves distance. One way is that it creates distance by covering space, it moves from one place to another. Another way is depth perception, the oscillation of the gaze. This too is a form of movement, it is also understanding. The gaze is in fact a very good expression of what it means for the body to understand because, in considering the gaze, we do not get distracted, as in analysis, by the act of moving from one place to another. Movement in this sense is easily, albeit falsely, reduced to mechanism.

Without the aid of representation, our bodies know what the best, or what Merleau-Ponty calls, the 'optimal' distance is from which to view an object. There is an optimal distance and direction from which objects can be seen and touched, which we do not cognitively choose, and which we cannot represent. In an art gallery we take in a picture so as to see both the scale and the detail in the painting. In the cinema, the distance from the screen is not the end of the body's distance-interaction with the objects, as we will see when we look at depth perception. Chapter Two will show that, for Merleau-Ponty, the whole

body, both the visual and the tactile, is always active in each and every perception, thereby overriding the rift between the psychic image and physical movement, and offering instead the situated subject. For now we will concentrate on the latter, starting with the notion that “to move one’s body is to aim at things through it, it is to allow oneself to respond to its call, independently of any representation” (PP 139).

To recapitulate some of the broad strokes of the argument up to now, understanding cannot be seen as representational, as it is under *l’analyse reflexive*; the reason it has been treated as such is in part due to an “experience error” made by psychologists and philosophers. This experience error consists of making understanding up from what analysis sees as its origins (which are often conceived as cognitive) rather than from lived experience. Part of the reason for this experience error is mind-body dualism, which treats the body as the transmitter of sensations to the mind, as a presenter of motor data. Merleau-Ponty reintegrates consciousness and movement, rejecting the idea of consciousness as cognition. He maintains that there is no *representational* relationship between consciousness and movement. He questions any presumed causal connections “between” consciousness and the body, a connection which, due to the centralized position of a cognitive subject, follows from a representational account of understanding.

Let us look into a representationalist perspective on consciousness and movement in more detail to understand what it is that Merleau-Ponty opposes. The view of O. Sittig is criticized by Merleau-Ponty in this context. For Sittig:

Consciousness will be motor as long as it furnishes

itself with a representation of movement. The body then executes the movement by copying it from the representation which consciousness presents to itself, and in accordance with a formula of movement which it receives from that representation. (Sittig, as quoted in *PP*, 139)

For Merleau-Ponty, this general form of movement - understood under the idea of causality - is faulty because it cannot account for movement in the world. Change of position does not rely on representation: "motility ... is not the handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand" (*PP* 139). Merleau-Ponty contributes the following agenda to Sittig's claim:

We still need to understand by what magical process the representation of a movement causes precisely that movement to be made by the body. The problem can be solved only provided that we cease to draw a distinction between the body as a mechanism in itself and consciousness as being for itself. (*PP* 139, fn 2)

This reasoning has to be carefully explored. How is a body to be understood as a mechanism in itself? What, exactly, is consciousness as being for itself? We are faced,

again, with a distinction between movement and thought, as well as the view of the body as a machine which the mind runs. For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between thought and movement is non-causal: there can be no causal relation between the mind and the body because they are not separately functioning entities. Consciousness as “for-itself” is exhausted by purely cognitive functioning. Merleau-Ponty seeks to extend consciousness to the body, which is not the receptor of the mind’s action. He contends that if the mind is not considered a separate entity from the body, we do not have to rely on the faulty idea that the mind informs or activates the passive body in movement or in any other of the subject’s activities. “Consciousness is a matter of an I can, not an I think” (*PP*, as quoted in Spicker, 259) But what can it mean to say that the body is conscious? It means, for Merleau-Ponty, that we can extend the capabilities traditionally reserved and tailored only for mind to the body. Memory, anticipation, and understanding are bodily, rather than thinking the body in purely mechanical terms. The “magical process” that “makes” the body move is not causal, but is perception itself. Moving does not require an original representation of movement. When I intend to look left, this movement of the eye carries within it as its natural translation an oscillation of the visual field.

“The movement to be performed can be anticipated, though not by representation” (*PP* 139). Movement is not anticipated by the mind, but performed. So what can the movement be anticipated by? Anticipated by the body, movement is understood as it is performed:

If I am ordered to touch my ear or my knee, I move

my hand to my ear or my knee by the shortest route,  
without having to think of the initial position of my  
hand, or that of my ear or the path between them ...  
it is the body which 'understands' in the acquisition  
of habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd,  
if understanding is subsuming a sense-datum under  
an idea, and if the body is an object. (*PP* 144)

But the body is not an object and the sense-datum is not subsumed under an idea. Rather, the body is not mobile, nor is movement understood in relation to a concept of movement, but in relation to "that highly specific thing toward which we project ourselves" (*PP* 138). And, "in order that we may move our body toward an object, the object must first exist for it" (*PP* 139). In other words, movement is an expression of the relationship between body-subjects and objects, not of concepts and bodies. We can see this expressly exemplified in the way understand movement when we watch a film.

In the cinema, we do not reach out to grab the railing like the character in the film falling from a building. We do, however, anticipate the motivation, we jump in our seats, hold our breath. How can we understand the possibility of falling, of failing to grip, of the force of hitting the pavement? Is it because we import from our "real" life this exact experience? Of course not. We ourselves have never been in this exact position before, this is not a representation of anything we have experienced. Nor is it because we recall

the colors on the screen that we anticipate the fall. It is not because we know, for instance, what a railing is. We see spontaneously, an event on the screen, not a collection of representations along side each other. We understand because our bodies contain the potential of doing all the things done on the screen. It is not according to hypothesis or judgment but the way our bodies position themselves in the world that we understand falling down. Again, "to move one's body is to aim at things through it, it is to allow oneself to respond to its call, independently of any representation" (*PP* 139) The body anticipates the fall not by being reflectively conscious of the concept of falling, but by projecting its own possibility of movement onto the objects it encounters on the screen.

## 1.2 The Present and Presence: Time and the Body's Memory

I measure time by how a body sways.

T. Roethke., "I Knew a Woman"

The film image depends on succession for meaning. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in "Film and the New Psychology": "the meaning of the shot depends on what directly precedes it". In order for there to be continuity or meaning in the film, there must be unity. Because each particular shot directly precedes the particular shot anterior to it, and the last shot in the film, then, contains and invokes the first. This is not a causal connection. The first shot in the film does not cause the last, just as my birth did not cause me to watch the film. The moments in the film are not *in* time but are temporally linked images

which move together and into each other. The removal of one image will throw off the whole thing, will make it into a different film. Take for example, Fritz Lang's film *M*. A long shot of the clock on the wall is interspersed with shots of a mother waiting for her little girl to come home - which we know in the next few shots will never happen. The placement and duration of the shot serves to invoke the worried countenance of the mother due to the lateness of the child. Merleau-ponty maintains "[t]he technique of the film is pre-objective *par excellence*" in that

the essence of the motion picture is that it conveys the meaning of the scene through the rhythm (the duration and sequences) of the shots. Thus it reproduces the way that meaning emerges through the organization of experience. (*SN* xiv)

The shots have a definite order and organization, a temporal organization. It is the essence of the film that the shots follow each other, and thereby acquire meaning. Two frames can never be on the screen at the same time, for the screen is the frame in which the film must unfold.

I can never be at two places at one time. I am always situated, which means I am always situated now, but this now is always in the context of being 'on my way', having 'come from', etc. Thus, another aspect of the relationship between non-representational understanding and situated presence, which we have seen includes movement, is time, temporal succession. The relationship between movement and time includes a relation to

the new. Understanding is progressive rather than formal and complete. In this way, understanding is temporal, rather than, as it is for the intellectualist, "having" time as a condition of experience. Kant, we remember, describes time as the "inner form" of intuition.

"In the present, being and consciousness coincide." (PP 424) With his rejection of kinds of analysis that reduce the contents of experience to origins, Merleau-Ponty realigns that which is always both new *and* original (origin-al), what I will call present/presence. He believes being and knowledge culminate in the working of the body as present/presence. Let us look further into Merleau-Ponty's notion of temporality, and its relationship to present-presence.

The "new presence", the image, in the film is not, in experience, reserved for cognition, as it is under a strictly representationalist analysis. The image is not just a reminder of past "presents", the instigator of the construction of objective formulas for understanding. Such a view reduces experience to knowledge and equates sensation with the reflective consciousness of sensation. For Merleau-Ponty time and presence are interrelated. Presence is not to be subsumed under that which is *presented to* or "given" to thought, as it is, for instance, in Kant's philosophy. Nothing is "given" in this way; there are no isolated given presents which are categorized, then, by the understanding. For Merleau-Ponty, "the given" object and the "given to" or the subject are related, connected, by what they share; they share body, they share being seen and seeing, moving and being moved toward, in short they are mutually present. "There is a

presence to the world", writes Merleau-Ponty, "that is older than intelligence". This presence to the world is, for Merleau-Ponty, that of the body. Merleau-Ponty uses the experience of movement to illustrate this:

Our bodily experience of movement is not a particular case of knowledge, it provides us with a way of access to the world and the object with a *praktognosia* which has to be recognized as original and perhaps primary. (PP 140)

The access to the world which is "original and perhaps primary" is the body's past. This primary past is not a concrete memory or a set of pre-conceivable categories and forms of thought or intuition. It is not possible to think of temporal succession, of the development of a primary past, in terms of conditions of experience. Rather, it is a past which only ever has meaning if it is, at the same time, seen within the context of the body's situated presence. "Co-existence, which in fact defines space, is not alien to time. The order of co-existents is inseparable from the order of sequences or rather, time is not only the consciousness of sequences." (PP 265) This presence is always only meaningful as it unfolds within the context of new engagements, *new presents*. "At each successive instant of movement, the preceding instant is not lost sight of, the body draws them together, on the basis of its present position." (PP 140) In short, the body is a living past. Rather than being the master of its domain, like the ego of the idealists, the body is equally imprinted with the past of the world ("the past sets its mark upon us" (PP 413)) as it makes its own

imprint. Merleau-Ponty maintains that this presence to the world is ambiguous (i.e., it cannot be laid out, for instance, in either formal conditions or in purely mechanical terms). This ambiguity, the fact that “we cannot deliver consciousness from all its opacity” (PP 242) is not negative. We fail to have a concept-idea of it because it is open and always ongoing, a succession. It is a living “sense of the past” that is always rooted in the sensible but it cannot be reduced to the sensible. “We feel the past behind us as an incontestable acquisition”. (PP 421) A living sense is not representable in the way analysis represents it. Nor can the body’s memory translate into conditions of experience for it is the unfolding of a past that will never explicitly catch up to it; it is always sustaining itself in activity. The body’s past is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “a past that has never been present” (PP 242).

The body is a living memory. “I can take in a certain period of my past life only by unfolding it anew.” (PP 423) In other words, to remember is not just to recollect isolated moments in past-time; it is, rather, to constantly affirm the future as part of the mutual presence of body and world by *living* the past. Edward Casey describes it thus:

The first pre-reflectivity makes possible the second,  
while the latter takes up and carries forward what  
has already been accomplished (and what is currently  
being accomplished) by the body. (Casey, 54)

As Merleau-Ponty writes:

Once again, time's "synthesis" is a transition-synthesis, the action of a life which unfolds, and there is no way of bringing it about other than by living that life, there is no seat of time, time bears itself on and launches itself afresh. (PP 424)

Merleau-Ponty maintains that the body, as original presence, has never been *present*, meaning the body can never be seen as acting here and now as a simple transmitter- its history, its memory must be taken into account. "When I understand a thing, a picture for example, I do not here and now effect its synthesis, I come to it bringing my sensory fields and my perceptual field with me." (PP 429)

If we think of present in a representationalist sense, as "given to thought", a presence that has never been present may sound contradictory. This is not true, however, if presence is regarded as *living, as existence*. That is, the originary past is not a pure or absolute past, like a condition of experience. It is a living past. It has never been present because it has always been presence itself. It is never present because it can never be congealed into an absolute present. The body cannot be understood unless it is understood in the process of a total life experience.

With the notion of an originary past that has never been present Merleau-Ponty overturns Kant's conditions of possible experience. Experience cannot be exhaustibly traced back to conditions. The discovery of such conditions cannot unlock and exhaust experience because the conditions transcend the field of immanence, of existence, that it tries to

explain. Being-in-the-world or existence, and the body's past, are one:

Neither the body nor existence can be regarded as the original of the human being, since they presuppose each other, and because the body is solidified or generalized existence, and existence a perpetual incarnation. (*PP* 166)

My connection and access to the past is not, then, purely cognitive. "If the past were available to us only in the form of express recollections we should continually be tempted to recall it in order to verify its existence." (*PP* 418) Through the structures of the body's activities, through movement, for example, I live the past. The notion of presence captures the double life of the body for Merleau-Ponty; it is at once a ground and that which it grounds, which means it is a primary and constant, living, expression of existence, neither anterior nor consequent. The traditional distinction between active mind and passive body (having a pure "I" precede and condition existence) is displaced by the notion of the lived body. As "a network of intentionalities" rather than "a line" (*PP* 414), time resists being used as a transcendent tool for organizing existence into a causal ground-grounded relation. Furthermore, as primary, original presence, the body does not simply replace the mind as the central control center of existence. It is not a formal, pure body-subject that Merleau-Ponty wants to uncover - this does not exist because "every movement is insolubly, movement and consciousness of movement" (*PP* 110).

Hence reflection does not itself grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experiences which it presupposed, upon which it draws and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past that has never been present. (PP 242)

### 1.3 Space and Orientation

Everything throws us back to the organic relationship between subject and space, to that gearing of the subject onto his world his world that is the origin of space ... clear perception and assured action is only possible in a space that's oriented. (PP 251)

The relationship of the past and the future would have no connection to our present situated experience without the body in that temporal succession is intimately linked to movement. And, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is not "in" space. Nor is space a form of intuition. Rather, space, for Merleau-Ponty, is lived. Without the history of succession and movement afforded by the body, we would be unable to understand a newly configured space. Whether it is something we have experienced before or something we have never before encountered, the body affords the subject an *oriented*, thus integrated, understanding of the world, unlike the subject of *l'analyse reflexive*.

Orientation is an expression of the body's power. But the body's power is more than the ability to follow the direction of a path called forth by the mind or by an object. Both the possibility and the limitations of movement are contained, in part, in the *direct* visual-tactile relation between the world of objects and the body, a relationship which cannot be reduced to a representational structure, in which there is no need for oriented space, thus no need for a body. Orientation replaces the causal framework laid out by a representationalist analysis. "Clear perception and assured action is only possible in a phenomenal space which is oriented" (*PP* 251).

Like time, the parts of the body are not laid out in a linear fashion. "The parts are laid out in a peculiar way, they are not laid out side by side but are enveloped in each other" (*PP* 98). That is, the body can never be seen as anything other than a whole, just as understanding can never be seen as involving anything but a unified subject, rather than a disembodied collection of mental representations. "[We] are always able to take our own bearings without having to cast the mind back" (*PP* 100), and "[b]odily space envelopes its parts instead of spreading them out." (*PP* 101) Envelopment refers to the way that the body must always be seen in relation to an interconnected system of spatial configurations, which correspond to the way in which the body is arranged, the way it envelops itself and its surroundings. Let us return to the cinema for an example. In the cinema we experience spatial relationships between ourselves and the screen, such as the

close up of Ingmar Bergman, the wide, sweeping landscapes of Chinese cinema. Among other things, one spatial factor which remains constant in both experiences is the size and shape of the screen, i.e. the same measurable distance lies between the top of Liv Ulmann's head and her chin in Bergman's *Persona* as lies between the sky and the earth in *Xiu Xiu*. It is the same distance between the screen and the body of the viewer, if I sit in the same row and seat. The difference lies not in a different linear arrangement, but, rather, in the different configuration of the space, a configuration which only makes sense in relation to the background of the body's experience. I recognize Liv as a person, even though sometimes I can only see her eyes on the screen in front of me. I can also recognize the wide shot as a field. In both cases, it is not my body as transmitter that is the issue (even though my vision may or may not be 20/20). Rather, I understand both of these relations due to my past bodily orientation. The relationship between the close up and the far away is not an abstract conceptual one, but can only make sense from the point of view of a body in relation to objects within varying vicinities. Thus, the *mind* does not alone understand the spatial configuration of an object (of which the close up is an example). Rather, the body (or more precisely, the body-subject) is already toward objects in a meaningful way due to its oriented being.

Merleau-Ponty maintains that "[t]he relegation of direction to the mind is the intellectualist mistake" (*PP* 249). The realist mistake, he claims, is "using the visual spectacle as the source of directions in space" (*PP* 249). Distance serves as an apt example again. The film, for instance, does not, in itself, offer the fixed point we need in

order to understand orientation. Direction and movement, in short, orientation, involve more than a relation between the two points of subject and object. "Among two things, two points are not enough to establish a direction." (PP 246) Direction in French translates as "sens", meaning sense, significance, and direction. Direction does not have a source "in" space, but is expressed relationally:

The points in space do not stand out as objective positions in relation to the objective position occupied by our body; they mark, in our vicinity, the varying range of our aims and our gestures.  
(PP 143)

The body, even considered as a point, is never immobile (as objects may be). Even if the hand does not here and now move, its potential for movement renders it always mobile. What it means to cover the distance between the body and an object goes beyond "physical" movement. Spatial levels, for Merleau-Ponty, replace the fixed points of geometrical (Euclidean) space. Instead of being measurable in terms of points, "vision and movement always occur in relation to *previously given* spatial levels."

As we will discuss in Chapter Two, the relationship between the visual and the tactile means the body always acts as a totality; to perceive something is to take the body's past and unfold it anew, always in relation to the spectacle. This changes what action means.

Being oriented does not simply mean that there is an arbitrary range of action available for the cognitive subject to *choose*, but that this pre-objective range of action is built into the body's ongoing relationship with objects.

"Space", Merleau-Ponty writes, "escapes us from above". That is, because space is intimately related to the body, we cannot regard it as having another, purely cognitive accessibility, which transcends the body's ongoing connection with the world. The spatiality and temporality of the body are expressed in the body's living connection to the world, i.e., in terms of the body's ongoing relation to "situations": time exists for me because I am situated in it. Being situated is juxtaposed against the idea, based on centralizing Euclidean space, of occupying "pure positions" or qualified regions. We do not apply spatial measurement *to* the world, just as we do not apply representations to experience. "Being situated in relation to an environment ... alone gives significance to the directions up and down in the physical world." (PP 284) Situation, thus, cannot be conceived as "the indivisible system governing the acts of unification performed by a constituting mind" (PP 244). Situation is only meaningful as *being* situated. Situation does not provide the background for the acts of cognition; it is part of the pre-reflective ground of cognition (which, as we have seen, is not temporally prior).

#### 1.4 The Operative Intentionality of the Body

For Merleau-Ponty's work, orientation is closely connected to intentionality. To understand what he means by originary or primary body space (the field of both present and possible action) we must turn to his concept of intentionality. What intentional link do we have with objects? For Husserl, "intentionality ... portrays our relation to the world as the conscious and self-conscious idea or mental representation of things" (Johnson, 27). Merleau-Ponty rejects such an account of intentionality. The word intentionality is derived from the Latin "intentio" which means tension or stretching, not unlike the "intentional threads" or "lines of force" (*PP* 48) which, as we will explore, involve our bodily relationship with objects. In other words, intentionality is a mode of being. Zaner writes:

Intentionality is not a descriptive characteristic of any mental process in virtue of which there is consciousness of. For Merleau-Ponty it constitutes the being of consciousness, the fact that consciousness in is in the world. It is always attached by tasks. (Zaner, 156)

The relation between intention and action is a difficult issue. What most approaches to this issue have in common, however, is the idea that intention is fundamentally cognitive.

Action follows the intention to act. Put generally, desire, belief, and motives precede the act, which is carried out on a specific object. In other words, before an action is performed, the goal is seen as held “in mind”. In “volition theory”, “mental action theory”, and the “causal theory” of Donald Davidson, the impetus of the action, and the “site” of intention, is the mind. This is not the case for Merleau-Ponty. The goal cannot come before the possibility of action that is taken to reach that goal. Thus we do not so much have the goal (e.g. opening the door) “in mind” before we do it, without having the goal, as Merleau-Ponty puts it “well in hand.” We need not expressly recall opening doors in order to open this one. The weight of the past “weighs upon me with all its weight, it is there, and though I may not recall any detail of it, I have the impending power to do so, I still have it in hand” (*PP* 416).

“We must grant man a very special way of being - intentional being - which consists in being oriented towards all things but not residing in any.” (*SN* 72) The idea that intentionality is “towards all things” overrides, according to Merleau-Ponty, thinking of intentionality as exercised in individual mental acts. Intentionality, it may be said, first, is not goal oriented. Merleau-Ponty identifies the mistake in the meaning of intentionality (in fact, in meaning in general) with conceiving it as a goal coming to fruition (i.e., the synthesis of a particular object). “We say that events have a meaning when they appear as the achievement or the expression of a single aim” (*PP* 428). Intentionality is seen, on this view, to involve acts of significance (*PP* 428). The goal coming to fruition determines whether it is significance, whether or not it is intentionally valid.

Intentionality would, thus, be the addition of express intentions. This idea of intentionality bypasses what Merleau-Ponty sees as a more primordial presence. Intentionality is not the construction of objects, it is not a process of signification, of giving meaning.

Merleau-Ponty's alternative to what he calls this "intentionality of acts" or "thetic intentionality", is "another kind which is the condition of the former's possibility, namely, an *operative intentionality* already at work before any positing or judgment". This operative intentionality is that of the body, it is, he says "beneath the intentionality of acts". (PP 429)

Operative intentionality is original, primordial and the ground of the practical structures of lived space. To say that this intentionality is *beneath* the intentionality of express acts is to say that it makes the express intentions or "judgments" involved in activity possible. Operative intentionality is the ground of their possibility - it is the "I can", the ability of the body to take up "free spatial thought" (PP 104). All specific intentions, then, whether it is moving from here to there, or pointing or grasping an object, have as their ground the realm of possibility (in essence, the intentionality) directly afforded by the body. As the originary past, the body has intentions that are conceptually prior to other judgements. The body's intentionality is not, however, causally related or temporally prior to express intentions; the body is always the lived body. We will explore what being "beneath" the intentionality of acts means after discussing operative intentionality in more detail.

A case study from the *Phenomenology of Perception* makes it clearer what Merleau-Ponty means by bodily or operative intentionality. Merleau-Ponty cites the case of someone with psychic blindness, whose spatial range is limited. The patient is only able to perform movements which apply to concrete or actual situations which he habitually performs, unless he is looking directly at the limb that he is asked to move (*PP* 103). While he can grasp his nose (e.g. in the act of blowing it, etc.) he experiences extreme difficulty pointing to it. That is, he is unable to anticipate and perform an act unless he can place himself in a practical situation, one in which he knows the goal, and its reason. What he has lost, then, is the full range of “anchorage” in his environment; he has lost touch with his operative or bodily intentionality. His “I can” (the possibilities he can actualize) is therefore inhibited. He must “know” the action in order to perform it. In normal movement, “bodily space may be given to me in an intention to take hold without being given in an intention to know” (*PP* 104). The ability to recall, to represent, does not give him a “whole” place in the world that bodily intentionality does in a “normal” person. The patient with psychic blindness cannot perform abstract movements because he always needs to represent to himself a previous situation in order to undertake the present one. “He places himself mentally in actual situations to which [his movements] correspond.” (*PP* 104) Because he cannot represent a full range of movement in general, he cannot, say, point to his head, but he can scratch it. He is not unlike our cinema man in this way, who can look at a chair but has trouble sitting on it.

## 1.5 The Relation between Spatial Orientation and Intentionality

“The intentionalities which anchor me to an environment ... do not run from a central ‘I’ but from my perceptual field itself” (*PP* 416). As “no causal relationship is conceivable between the subject and the body, his world or his society”, the perceptual field is not a collection of objects “taken up” by perception, but something inhabited. The nature of a “perceptual field” will be explored in more detail in chapter two. For now it is important to understand that the perceptual field is partially made up of the “spatial levels” discussed above. Top and bottom are instances of spatial levels. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a mirror experiment to discuss the establishment of oriented spatial levels. In a mirror that is held at a right angle, everything seems slanted at first. Soon, everything seems vertical again, we “figure it out” so to speak. It is not the mirror that changes, and we do not calculate the distances and see that it is the same room. It is also not that we can go “into” the mirror and explore the room. “The redistribution of high and low is thrown into relief without any motor exploration” (*PP* 248). The exploration is accomplished by the perceiving subject, whose visual field motivates it. At first, we seem to be dealing with new spatial levels, the man walking in the mirror, for instance, seems to be walking slantwise. But soon our bodies fill in, if you will, the “gaps”, and reorient it to the new configuration. In the film “Moulin Rouge”, the image contorts and relaxes so quickly, that at first some viewers are so disoriented it is rather nauseating. The camera zooms in to catch a shaky eye, pulls out again and pans back and back, through the window beyond the entire city of Paris in a second, only to arrive again in the room in

which the scene was set. This does not happen in, as we say, “real life”. We can orient ourselves to this newly configured space, it has meaning, because our bodies can be up, far, close, etc. I have never been in a room, then out of the city, then in a room again in a matter of seconds (I have never, for that matter, been to Paris), but, as we will see, it is my virtual body which still has the potential of understanding these situations.

Without the possibility of spatial levels offered by the body, up and down would be meaningless (as would falling down, reaching up, etc.). Up and down are not just concepts. But, and this is crucial, they are not just understood in concrete doing, as in the psychic blindness patient. “The possession of a body implies the *ability* to change levels and *understand* space.” (PP 251)

The body receives its orientation from the general  
level of experience ... [i]t remains to be seen  
what precisely is this level that is always ahead of  
itself, since every constitution of a level  
pre-supposes a different pre-established level.  
(PP 249)

It remains to be seen (literally) because we cannot set out determinate spatial levels in advance as universal measures of movement. Up and down have no meaning on their own (PP 249). As “beneath” (and not prior to) express intentions, the body’s

intentionality acts at this most “general level of experience”. The body “plays an essential part in the establishment of a level” (*PP* 249). So while the act of establishing spatial levels is ongoing, it is neither all accomplished beforehand by some eternal measurement, nor is it reducible to the present interaction with objects here and now so to speak. As Zaner aptly puts it:

The physical space of empiricism lacks practical structure: any teleological dimension would have to be superimposed. The intentional structures of purposiveness cannot be generated out of a purely mechanical physiology. Although intellectualism can account for the purposiveness of bodily movement in terms of the intentional structuring of space, it fails to realize that the structures of practical space cannot be reduced to the categories of a disembodied consciousness. (Zaner, 136)

Space is, thus, not purely mechanical, i.e. it is not the relation between mute points. Nor, however, is it imposed by “the mind”: it is not purely intentional. Merleau-Ponty maintains that space cannot be so easily slotted into this kind of either/or. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is intentional, in that orientation follows from the general spatial level of experience afforded by the body’s operative intentionality.

The relationship between space and vision is bodily. As we will see, the understanding body includes for Merleau-Ponty the emergence of new conception of space which he refers to as virtual.

## Chapter 2 What Perception Is

Are we to say perception reveals objects as a light illuminates them in the night?

(EM 242)

### 2.0 The Divided Subject

"Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them". (*PP xi*) As "the darkness in the theater," the body's presence acts, for Merleau-Ponty, as a kind of background, integral to understanding any situation, for anything to have meaning for us. Seeing perception as only the deliberate taking up of a position or view misses the unity that is perception. It is, for Merleau-Ponty, the bodily history of the unified perceiving subject that has been removed from the philosophical history of perception. As a background, the body's history stands with it at every express perception. Every express perception presupposes the body's mobility and the mobility of the gaze as one. In an exchange of meaning that resists a tactile-visual dualism, "the body's mobility is a natural consequence of my vision". Vision is mobile. What I see does not make "me" (apart from my body) toward it, for in seeing I am already moving. My body as a totality of experience is involved, and I project that body of experience onto the world as it calls me to do, "not as an object represented, but as that highly specific thing toward which we project ourselves" (*PP 138*). Because we cannot measure

this body of experience which I project, it will no longer be called the mobile body but, in its fusing with the visual, it will be called virtual. In the movie theater, my eyes move out to the screen, and in my perception is contained all the bodily interactions I've had with objects that now allow me to understand what I see. I do not understand apart from the body but through it. Perception is central because it is the most fundamental expression of what is non-mechanistic, non-causal about the body; perception is the working out of the operative intentionality, the "essence" of the virtual body. Objects are *grasped* by perception in a way which includes the tactile and the visual as one force.

We need to see why the body as a totality has been overlooked before moving on to discuss the full implications of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception and its relation to the virtual body in Chapter Three. It is interesting that the body is compared to the *darkness* in the theater in Merleau-Ponty's metaphor. Light is often connected with the "important" acts of the body. The capacity that has often been seen to link knowledge and the body is vision. Hearing is perhaps considered the other knowledge-sense. The "tactile senses", touch for instance, are usually considered lower on the scale. Animals see things, for example, but while their vision is taken as an extension or means of their 'more sensuous' or tactile senses, i.e., they see things to eat, to drink, to mate with, our seeing is taken as something that is beyond the tactile. References relating vision and knowledge are common, contained in our everyday metaphors, i.e., I *see* what you mean, it *looks* like you're right, I am *focusing* on an idea, a light bulb above the head means an idea, etc. Compared to the other senses, visual perception occupies a unique place in

understanding the world. How has this connection traditionally played out in philosophical terms?

Vision is often seen as a sense which tells us about the world, while the other senses (touch, for instance) tell us only about our bodily vicinity. "Tactile", in other words, is a description allotted to the senses for which close proximity to the body is necessary. This is the limit of the tactile. Touch, taste, smell, and even hearing, while perhaps less so, are understood as having only a "finite" bodily range of action. What is traditionally seen as the limited power of the tactile senses rests in this "limited" range of action. The tactile senses are seen, that is, as occupying a limited range of action in comparison to the "wide ranging" powers of thought. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is always situated and, thus, so is the subject. It is situated but it acts in a wide ranging way, according to Merleau-Ponty. Being situated is not limiting but a positive expression of our being in the world and is thus part of an integrated theory of understanding.

Merleau-Ponty maintains that the relationship between the tactile senses and situated being is far more complex than is usually thought. The mistake is that we root the tactile to the spot; we fail to see it in terms of possibility and rather tether the senses to the surface of the body. Merleau-Ponty says that Descartes goes so far even as to consider vision in this manner, writing, for instance, in the "Optics" of the science of perfecting vision. Descartes writes about "all the things which are capable of making vision more perfect" (Descartes, 60). One of these things is the telescope. The idea here is that, once

magnified, the object sets off the structures of vision to a more perfect degree. In making the object bigger, vision is made better. Perception is seen as a mechanism set off by an object that is external to it, but also at the closest quantifiable distance. Merleau-Ponty contends "the Cartesian concept of vision is modeled after the sense of touch" (EM 170). That is, if the object is to be perfectly seen and examined with certainty, and the examination is empirical observation, this action must take place at close quarters, i.e., through a telescope or through the hand grasping. If, for instance, one is unable to directly observe an object in *every* aspect (like men or robots in coats and hats from windows), judgment makes these details present - "judgment sees what I thought I saw with my eyes". According to Merleau-Ponty, my judgment does not "keep them present", the men in the street that Descartes judges are men, *are* present. The hats and coats are walking around, with a certain gait, a certain kind of movement through the world that our bodies recognize, that in this case mirrors that of our own bodies, and that speaks to a relation between the tactile and the visual and understanding. As an integrated visual-tactile-consciousness, the important parts of the relationships with objects that I have previously had are not to be taken as intellectual en masse. These former relationships have not just been learned and retained by my mind but by my whole being, and are retained by my body. This phenomenal body does not need to touch wax, for instance, to recognize it from a distance as wax, but only has to have had a previous tactile experience somehow akin to it which the body retains and expresses at every new encounter- our previous tactile experience is always already in play.

It is never our objective body that we move,  
but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery  
in that, since our body, as the potential of this  
or that part of the world, surges towards objects  
to be grasped and perceives them. (*PP* 106)

Memory, as we discussed in Chapter One is extended to the body by Merleau-Ponty. Memory is always directly and specifically related to the new, in that the past only ever means anything in relation to what comes next. The body, carrying with it its past with every new encounter, is the site at which the past series of events extends into the next, while at the same time always remaining situated. We cannot understand this connection if we consider memory apart from the body, apart from the union of this visual and the tactile, to which we will turn soon in more detail.

What is wrong with the Cartesian idea of vision is that the structures and aims of perception are mistakenly replaced or bypassed in favor of the structures and aims of cognition. The “natural light of the mind” is a metaphor of vision collapsed into cognition. Judgment, with vision as its handmaid, fills in where the body cannot go. “In one fell swoop, Descartes removes action at a distance and relieves us of that ubiquity which is the whole problem of vision”. (*EM* 170) There has been a limit given to the body which does not belong to it. What is action at a distance? How does action at a distance work to show the relation between the body and understanding?

First of all, Merleau-Ponty contends that the removal of action at a distance, and the full participation of the body in understanding, is implied by what he calls the "constancy hypothesis". The "constancy hypothesis" states that there is a "point by point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception" (*PP* 7). In other words, such a hypothesis could not account, for instance, for depth perception, but looks at the way the objects are arranged on the retina. Merleau-Ponty believes that this kind of mistake is found in some philosophical approaches to perception:

For God, who is everywhere, breadth is immediately equivalent to depth. Intellectualism and empiricism do not give us any account of the human experience of the world; they tell us what God might think of it. (*PP* 255)

Thus, depth is considered invisible unless it is conceived as breadth, which accounts for the appeal of the constancy hypothesis. Depth perception is tied to perspective and not to the relationship between things; "[depth] quite clearly belongs to perspective and not to things" (*PP* 255). This renders the constancy hypothesis obsolete. The relationship between objects, which renders depth visible, is one which is recognized due to the body's participation in the development of spatial levels; near-far, up-down etc. And,

whenever these relations are called up in perception, there is action at a distance:

The law of constancy cannot avail itself...  
[i]f we turn back to the phenomena, they show  
us that the apprehension of a quality, just as  
that of size, is bound up with a whole perceptual  
context, and that the stimulus no longer furnishes  
us with the indirect means of isolating a layer of  
immediate impressions. (*PP* 8)

Sensation, and, I would say, the tactile senses in particular, were often conceived as an effect, having a limited range of action and thus unsuited to the higher order functions of understanding. "The sensible cannot be defined as the immediate effect of an external stimulus" (*PP* 8) and Merleau-Ponty rejects this "definition of sensation in causal terms" (*PP* 11), maintaining that it does not account for the complex web of action that the body brings with it to every express perception. The tactile senses are usually understood as significant in understanding only what is in the immediate to the body, what is near the body. Merleau-Ponty's vicinity is the range of possibility afforded by the body in the wider context of understanding. There is, for Merleau-Ponty, a hierarchy which subverts the body as elementary in understanding, a hierarchy which is responsible for "identifying 'elementary' psychic functions, and of distinguishing them from 'superior'

functions less strictly bound up with the bodily substructure" (PP 9). "The elementary event is already invested with meaning, and the higher function will bring into being only a more integrated mode of existence..." (PP 10). The lived bodily experience which is the ground of the relation between sensation and understanding is one in which sensation subsists beyond the immediate sense data to constitute an enduring part of understanding.

If the tactile ends in close proximity to the body, it would, then, seem as if the tactile is immediate and temporary: a fleeting smell, the simple caress of well polished wood, or a lump of wax. It would seem the tactile is not enduring, not like something that can be visualized, imaged, remembered, in short, thought. This relegation of the tactile to the immediate, to "simple" feeling, however, assumes that understanding, the continuity of our experience and all it involves, memory, imagination, etc., is purely cognitive. Judgment is seen to work within a formal system which uses data, while sensation is seen to somehow provide the data. Vision usually occupies the status of a higher order function because it is not seen as tied to the world by flesh (it is "more free" than the tactile) and because it aids in the formation of mental images. The data of the tactile is often seen as something that must be translated, while Merleau-Ponty sees sensation as having a direct relation of understanding to the world. "Understanding" is not "subsuming a sense datum under an idea" (PP 144).

For Merleau-Ponty there is a direct relation between the object and the sensation in which an immediate incorporation of the subject's past takes place, which is simultaneous with

thought rather than subsumed under it. Thought, and the formation of mental images, is not the source of understanding:

The traditional notion of sensation was not a concept born of reflection, but a late product of thought directed towards objects, the last element in the representation of the world, the furthest removed from its original source, and therefore the most unclear. (*PP* 10)

In "An Unpublished Text", Merleau-Ponty outlines the two traditional views on perception that have supported the idea that the mind is the unifying agent of sensation. Empiricism conceives perception as "the action of external things on the body", where the body is taken as "an automatic machine that needs an outside agent to set off its pre-established mechanisms", and the mind is here understood as the unifier of "impressions" into ideas. The body is something that is "set off", receptive, reactive rather than active. Empiricism makes sensation into impressions, psychic images distinct from physical movement. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty maintains in the "Primacy of Perception": "[t]he originally given data of sensation are [wrongly conceived as] fragmented, isolated, atomic entities, "oblivious" of each other, awaiting the intervention of the activities of the mind for their relation into organized wholes. From the idealist point of view, perception is a part of the autonomy of consciousness, an extension of

"pure contemplative consciousness imposed on a thing like body" (UT 3-4). Kant, for example, understands sensation as a passive receptivity which supplies consciousness with the raw materials which it unifies, formalizes and categorizes, activities unique to consciousness. These philosophies commonly forget - in favor of a pure exteriority or of a pure interiority - the insertion of the mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation which we entertain with our body, and correlatively, with perceived things". (Primacy 4)

One way, then, to see the emergence of a distinction between the visual and the tactile is in terms of a subject-world relation understood as a relation of interior to exterior. The bodily is usually seen as exterior, that which happens outside "me", unlike consciousness or understanding, which is interior. Kant says, interestingly, that the hands are "an outer brain of man" (*PP* 316). The focus on the inner as the seat of consciousness started disappearing in later philosophies, sometimes being replaced with philosophies of exteriority, in which everything is "co-primordial", to use Heidegger's phrase. Merleau-Ponty's development of "la chair" (the flesh) in his later thought may seem to put him into the category of a pure exteriority as well, one in which the subject disappears into the "flesh of the world". We cannot go into this here, but suffice it to say that, for Merleau-Ponty there must always be relation. We can see that with Merleau-Ponty's idea of operative intentionality and what it entails - the reintegration of vision with the body, the reintegration of the visual and the tactile and understanding - understanding is not relegated to an inner seat of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty, rather than shifting from interiority to exteriority, puts forward a theory of perception which

questions the use of such notions at all. The body is too often, Merleau-Ponty contends, relegated to the external, that which does not involve awareness because it “happens”, while the “organizers” of experience have often been seen as internal (i.e., mind, association, etc.) Merleau-Ponty blurs the lines of the inner and the outer, of vision and touch, with the idea that the tactile history of the body is involved heavily in visual activity and both in understanding: such a move maintains the impossibility of making the visual into impressions or mental representations and thus resists their subsequent mental organization. Like the metaphors of perception (focus, etc.), Merleau-Ponty wants to reclaim the metaphors of inner and outer as spatial-temporal metaphors in a body world scheme. Certain binaries- internal-external, visual-tactile - are questioned, but they are not done away with completely. We think, we dream. This is the evidence of a sort of “inner” life. The point is that the pre-reflective body is part of this life, it is a pre-reflective foundation for thought. “Perceptual behavior emerges from these relations to a situation and to an environment which are not the workings of a pure and knowing subject” (Primacy 4).

## 2.1 The Integration of the Tactile and the Visual

For Merleau-Ponty, a large part of the misrepresentation of perception, and thus understanding, rests, as I've said, in the traditional distinction made between the visual and the tactile. The separation of the visual and the tactile into hierarchical rather than

interrelated parts of a unified understanding is rejected by Merleau-Ponty. A divisive theory of the relation of the visual and the tactile implies not only a mind-body dualism, but a dualistic conception of the body. As a result, while visual perception is not really taken as thought, it is not grouped under the heading of "the senses" either and thus occupies a sort of limbo position, which is to say it is position-less, ascertained apart from situated existence. If we do not consider the tactile aspect of perception we may, like the idealists, believe that we "constitute the world":

... we can, at least as first sight, flatter  
ourselves that we constitute the world, because  
it presents us with a spectacle spread out before  
us at a distance, and gives us the impression of  
being immediately present everywhere and situated  
nowhere. (Primacy 15)

Through ascertaining the connection between the tactile and the visual, and seeing the body as part of a unified structuring of our understanding of the world, Merleau-Ponty wants to relocate perception in the world and reclaim the metaphors of light, perspective, point of view, focus, etc., for a theory of understanding which includes the body as a visual-tactile whole in a unified understanding.

I cannot forget ... that it is through my body that

I go to the world, and tactile experience occurs  
ahead of me, if it accords with a certain nature of  
my consciousness and if the organ which goes out to  
meet it is synchronized with it. (Primacy 15)

With the idea that perception must be seen from the point of view of its position in the phenomenal world, Merleau-Ponty rethinks the traditional distinction between the tactile and the visual. Position has usually been reserved for the tactile body. Though the eyes have been seen to have a position, the tearing away of vision from its own intentional structure and the placing of structure beyond the body as a recipient rather than a fully active entity have prevented perception from being seen in its true bodily being.

## 2.2 Perspective

I am not tied to any one perspective but can change my  
point of view, being under compulsion only in that  
I must always have one, and can only have one at once -  
let us say, then, that there arose a fresh *possibility*  
*of situations*. The event of my birth has not passed  
completely away, it has not fallen into nothingness  
in the way an event in the objective world does,

for it committed a whole future, not as a cause that determines effect, but as a situation, once created, inevitably leads to some outcome. There was henceforth a new setting, and the world received a new layer of meaning. (PP 407)

The process of perception is understood as what Merleau-Ponty calls a transitive, or perceptual, synthesis. "The synthesis which constitutes the unity of the perceived objects and which gives meaning to the perceptual data is not an intellectual synthesis." (Primacy 15) Transitive synthesis involves the store of the body's knowledge of the world, which is expressed in integrated visual-tactile activity. Transition, movement, in short, bodily being, is a part of the synthesis of objects. Vision is rooted in the body's tactile relation to the world, and thus to perspective. Perception, in Kant's notion of synthesis, for instance, encounters that which appears, which is given and synthesized by higher functions, rather than seeing the tactile as itself an active unifier of experience. Under such an analysis, perception occupies a place within the *intellectual synthesis* but thus cannot occupy a view. "A transition synthesis does not link disparate perspectives but brings about the passage from one to another." (PP 265)

With the integration of movement and vision the limited alternative of "seeing" from either all perspectives or a one-to-one correspondence between object and vision is overcome. Neither are realistic. Perception always involves seeing from somewhere. Because the history of perception places it in a position only theoretically, under the

experience error, it occupies no practical, bodily space, and thus no perspective. Such theories of knowledge place vision at once at the level of mind and not at the level of mind, i.e. either as "free ranging" thought or mechanism. The structures of perception thus essentially view the world from "nowhere" (PP 67). If we want to know what perception is, we have to look at the act of perception in terms of *transition*, not to either site *specific* perception (i.e., under the constancy hypothesis and empiricism) or fully *possible* perception, which is not considered positioned in the world at all under *l'analyse reflexive*. In other words, perception is tied to the mobile body rather than posited as a philosophical principle.

Reflection never lifts itself out of any  
situation, nor does the analysis of perception  
do away with the fact of perception, the thisness  
of the precept or the inherence of perceptual  
consciousness in some temporality and some locality.  
(PP 42)

Merleau-Ponty maintains that maximum vision is expressed in the idea of "tending toward" an "optimal view", the best perspective, through the spontaneous focus of our gaze, which recognizes the "optimum distance" from which an object is to be seen clearly.

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself: at a shorter or greater distance we have merely a perception blurred through excess or deficiency.

(PP 302)

The spontaneous adjustment for optimum vision presupposes the lived structures of the mobile gaze and its relationship to the mobile body. Depth, we remember, can only be for a seeing body, not a God's eye. We do not decide that this or that is the best distance, nor, we note, can we *represent* this distance to ourselves, but only discover it by occupying it. We cannot discount the other objects in our line of vision when looking, even if we do not expressly focus on them - such a relationship between objects and the body is needed for the experience of depth perception. Optimum distance, depth perception both, then, include an integrated sensory experience of the world. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, the unity or "totality" of the gaze as the expression of embodied existence is found in its relation and not its separateness from the other senses.

That is,

It is commonplace to say that we have five senses, and it would seem at first glance, that each of them

is like a world out of touch with the others ...

"But", he goes on to say,

My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile, and  
audible givens, I perceive in a total way with my  
whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing,  
a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses  
at once. (FNP 49-50)

We cannot make this structure prior to its individual instantiations because these instantiations are at the same time expressions of this unity. The totality of vision is thus a totality that is never complete. The gaze is always potential, but in being bodily, it is always situated. In blurring the lines between the situated and the open (i.e., in that openness is reserved usually for the mind and situatedness for the body), Merleau-Ponty gives perception back to the body and the body back to perception, and in so doing he expands the horizons of both. This expansion of horizons is contained in the idea of the virtual. We have established that the past is never there waiting to be discovered and recalled but is rather lived. As living, our relationship to the visual is now no longer seen as a relation to the exterior that is made into a mental representation. Thus Merleau-Ponty has gone beyond the "Husserlian account of intentionality...which portrays our relation to the world as the conscious and self-conscious idea or mental

representation of things" (Johnson, 27). What alternative has Merleau-Ponty left us for talking about the relationship between the eye and the image?

### 2.3 True and False Vision

Only the painter is entitled to look without being obliged to appraise what he sees. (EM 161)

Merleau-Ponty moves away from making activity and being in general a series of deliberate acts (under the causal intentional structure discussed in Chapter One), subsumed under laws of consciousness. Seeing experience in this way stems, he says, from the overarching preoccupation, not with what is present but with what is true:

However necessary this verification may be, specifying criteria and demanding from our experience its credentials of validity, it is not aware of our contact with the perceived world which is simply there before us, beneath the level of the true and false. (UT 3)

Again, Merleau-Ponty talks about the body as "beneath" other "levels" of experience.

Again, the level of beneath must be seen as foundational but not casually so. The body does not cause the mind to think. Perception is involved in so far as the emergence of the visual scene is at once new and foundational for judgment.

In order that I may recognize the tree as a tree,  
it is necessary that, beneath this familiar meaning,  
the momentary arrangement of the visible scene should  
begin all over again, as on the very first day of the  
vegetable kingdom, to outline the individual idea of  
this tree. Such would be natural judgment, which  
cannot yet know its reasons for it is in the process  
of creating them. (PP 44)

Perception is once again seen as a kind of “natural judgment”. Motility was seen as a “natural consequence” of vision. Both vision and motility are viewed not at the level of the cognitive true and false but within a field of presence, in which the body interacts with the world, in which seeing and seeing truly are one and the same thing.

In the development of his philosophy between the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty no longer makes a distinction between the level of the true and the level of perception. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he says “perception is beneath the level of the true and false”. In *The Visible and the Invisible*,

Merleau-Ponty writes:

It is our experience of inhabiting the world by  
our body, of inhabiting the truth of our whole  
selves without there being need to choose nor even  
to distinguish between the assurance of seeing and  
the assurance of seeing the true, for in principle  
they are one and the same thing. (VI 28)

Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, value is closely aligned with bodily being, and, any rift  
between thought and movement, knowledge and action, mind and body is, if not  
overcome, at least heavily put into question.

### Chapter 3 Habit, Gesture and the Acquisition of Meaning

If habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action what is it? (PP 144)

Habit has its abode neither in thought nor in the objective body but in the body as the mediator of the world. (PP 145)

#### 3.0 The Acquisition of Meaning Through Habit and The Body Image

For Merleau-Ponty, there is a switch to seeing understanding as in part an “I can”, a doing, an unfolding, rather than a cognitive, constituting power. Consciousness as an “I can” refutes the idea that awareness is essentially self-reflective, and, in this context, the visual does not take the form of mental representation, seen as opposed to physical movement. Perception must not be held to be “the vision upon which I reflect”- for “I cannot think except as thought” (EM 176). The unity of consciousness, of the understanding subject, must be sought, then, in examining why there is a *meaningful* world for us, from which the subject cannot be understood in isolation, or in a constituting relation. In so doing, he looks at self-reflexivity, the awareness of oneself as a subject in relation to other subjects, as bodily.

Other people and objects are part of our world not just in being taken up, nor are they constituted by us. Merleau-Ponty advocates looking at the *experience* of otherness rather than supporting analysis which posits a formal distinction between self and other (Smith, 41). He does so, in part, by focusing on the bodily pressure things exert on us. The "position" of other objects in the world, as they are arranged in relation to our bodily being, both open paths and positions available to us as well as closing other ones. We are presented with our bodily position in the world not through reflection but through what Merleau-Ponty calls habit. "Bodily position is presented to us through habit." (PP 143) It is habit that

elucidates the nature of the body image. When we say  
that it presents us immediately with our bodily  
Position, we do not mean, after the manner of the empiricists,  
that I consists of a mosaic of 'extensive sensations'.  
It is a system which is open on to the world, and correlative  
with it. (PP 143)

With the notion of habit, Merleau-Ponty elucidates the idea that being open to ourselves (what is often seen as cognition or self-reflexivity) is already included in being open to, or towards, other people and objects. The unity between self-reflection and the body found in habit, is part of having a meaningful experience of both ourselves and others. "We know the range and vicinity of these objects [of "others"] as well as we know that of our own body". (PP 143) Perception thus includes a unified self-awareness *in its activity*.

Like the world's unity, that of the *I* is invoked  
rather than experienced each time I perform an act  
of perception, each time I reach a self-evident  
truth, and the universal *I* is the background against  
which all those acts stand out. (*PP* 406)

Seeing oneself as a thinking thing in an extended world, or any version of this, is eradicated. The self-awareness which is expressed in perception is one which includes the projection of a body image.

Our body image changes with new experiences, or, more precisely, it is invoked in a slightly new way. "Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments". (*PP* 143) Appropriating fresh instruments means encountering and understanding something new. To learn how to do something (to appropriate a fresh instrument) is to newly develop a familiarity with the object, a familiarity that is then written into the body's behavior, and becomes a new part of the body image. Knowing how to type, for example, involves "knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when the effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort". (*PP* 146) We have seen, however, that the effort of typing, which involves "knowledge in the hands", is in fact made even when the object is *seen*. "I only have to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it." (*EM* 163) It is

all part of the effort made by the unified body.

For Merleau-Ponty, I am “caught up in the fabric of the world” and “my body is a thing among things, but because it moves itself and sees it holds things in a circle around it” (EM 163). This holding, this “intentional arc”, is at once a visual arc. It does not mean I hold things or grip them with the muscles of my hands. It does not mean I have a mental grip on things. Rather, it means that my history as a bodily being allows me to orient myself anew in new situations. In seeing a lamp, for instance, “I do not represent the unseen sides of the lamp to myself” (Primacy 13). The unseen side is “filled in” by my operative intentionality. “The hidden side is present in its own way, it is in my vicinity” (Primacy 14). Being in my vicinity, it counts for me, but it is never posited as a complete object, as in a representationalist account would suggest. Rather, to say that the other counts for me, is to say that its meaning is accessible without the need for me to impose a conceptual framework onto it every time I see it.

For example, in the cinema, we are often presented with partial views of objects. We see a door, for example, but we know the door is part of a building. We know too that a building is a standing structure with four sides and a roof. We do not imagine, in a scene in an apartment, that the actor strides through a wall and disappears. When she leaves one room, we know she enters another. The unseen sides, in other words, are filled in by us. How do we do this? We could say, in one respect, that we have had practice. The cinema experience has, in the age of the projected moving image, formed part of our

body experience. It is interesting to note how this forming has progressed. When “talkies” arrived on the scene people were at first surprised at the sounds “coming from another room”, which was not seen in the shot. The untrained ear and eye hadn’t yet progressed that far: the body image was not developed to that capacity yet. But, back to the door and the building - can we say that we understand the door conceptually represents the building? Merleau-Ponty would say the door *qua* building counts or has meaning for me, because, although it does not appear on the screen, nor is it filled in conceptually, it still remains in the range of my bodily vicinity. In other words, I understand the new situation always through the projection of the body image.

Because I am a body, I have an affinity to objects which is prior to a conceptual framework. The concept derives its meaning from this pre-established affinity with objects. And, upon seeing an object, both the concept (what the object is) and the use (how I deal with it) are invoked at once. “The intentional object is offered to the spectator at the same time as the object itself” (*PP* 185-186). Thus,

The subject, when put in front of his scissors,  
needle and familiar tasks, does not need to look  
for his hands or his fingers, because they are not  
objects to be discovered in objective space: bones,  
muscles and nerves, but potentialities already  
mobilized by the perception of the scissors or needle,

the central end of those intentional threads which  
link him to the objects given. (PP 106)

We have been saying throughout the paper that all the body's former positions are included, as a part of the living past, described in Chapter One, in being able to recognize an object from a single perspective. We now see that habit is Merleau-Ponty's term for the power to do this, and that he calls this power the body image: the body is constantly replenished through habit. "The face or back of a piece of material is intelligible only for a subject who can approach the object from one side or another side". (PP 430) Again, the film always only presents us with sides of objects. We know, for instance, in Fritz Lang's "Metropolis", that the workers live underground, not because anyone told us, but because we see them ascending. In other words, the subject projects a world of movement onto its present field of understanding. In this way, "[e]very perceptual habit is still a motor habit" (PP 153). The same, as we said, can be said of *using* an object. Appropriating a fresh instrument entails the coming together of the old and the new, the body's past and its present situatedness. "We say that a body has understood and habit has been cultivated when it has absorbed a new meaning, and assimilated a fresh core of significance." (PP 146) Thus, habit does not mean - as it usually does - something done over and over again without anything new, for "[t]he acquisition of a habit is indeed the grasping of a significance but it is the motor grasping of a motor significance" (PP 142).

Merleau-Ponty's particular twist on the relationship between significance and

understanding comes out of his attempt to trace the genesis or development of meaning as ongoing in experience; experience itself is pregnant with meaning or as, Merleau-Ponty maintains, "matter is pregnant with its form". We can but note this attempt here.

Merleau-Ponty maintains that the ideas of "meaning as either mechanical causation or as the working out of an idea ... have oscillated between empiricism and idealism". (*SN* xvii) Meaning is afforded, for Merleau-Ponty, by the subject's integrated experience of the world expressed by perception.

Merleau-Ponty holds that meaning is something of which we need not only be self-reflectively or cognitively aware. Rather than a relation between an aim that can be articulated as having meaning on its own even before it relates to a given object (as a condition and its sense datum), Merleau-Ponty regards meaning as present at the level of habit. "[T]he given is a route, an experience which gradually clarifies itself" (*PP* 38). The body follows the route which remains open for acts of perception. Merleau-Ponty describes objects as "a totality of things toward which we project ourselves" (*PP* 387). For example, we know how to drive a car through a narrow passage, and can manipulate this object without scraping the wall because our bodies contain this knowledge, we have followed this route. We do not need to measure the distance between the car and the wall. Rather, understanding the geometrical relationship between objects - for this relationship to have any meaning, the pre-reflective relationship between world and subject is necessary.

Thus there is an immediacy involved in seeing, in the sense that, for Merleau-Ponty, there are “spontaneous” encounters with the visible. That is, we do not impose a conceptual framework on the visible *in order to* understand it. But this does not mean, as some have interpreted it, that perception remains essentially passive for Merleau-Ponty. It just means that the conceptual framework is already contained in perception, which is part of understanding, rather than the transmitter of the visual to cognition. It means that perception is always already meaningful.

### 3.1 Gesture and Meaning

A clearer articulation of the exception of counting or meaning to the pre-reflective is often expressed by Merleau-Ponty through the idea of “gesture”. “The sense of the gesture is not given but understood, that is, on the spectator’s part. The whole difficulty is to conceive the act clearly without confusing it with a cognitive operation.” (PP 185-186)

We will turn to the gesture, then, to further explore the relation between the body and meaning in Merleau-Ponty.

It is interesting to note a discussion on the gesture by Giorgio Agamben, found in his book *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, in part because Agamben relates the gesture to the cinema, which has been our pet example.

Agamben maintains that, in our society, there has been “an effacement and loss of the

gesture" (Agamben, 137). When we interpret art, for instance, we look at it as a static image, a "mythical fixity". "Because the researches were conducted by means of images, it believed that the image was also their object." (Agamben, 138) We recall Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the experience error, in which perception is seen as made up of the contents of the perception rather than of the relation between the viewer and the world. For Agamben, the cinematic image is not "a hardened crystal of historical memory" (Agamben, 138), or images made into objects for a representational theory of perception, to use Merleau-Ponty's framework. Agamben maintains that "we should not really speak of images [when talking about art, for example], but of gestures" (Agamben, 139). The cinema provides, for Agamben, a rich example of "the freeing of the image in the gesture" (Agamben, 139). It is difficult to see the gesture in terms of a static image, and more difficult still to understand it as a representation. This is due to the body movement inherent in the gesture; it is therefore a perfect concept for Merleau-Ponty.

The "suspicion" of the seen world which we discussed in Chapter One was really a suspicion of perception and the body's ability to understand what it sees without the aid of mediating representations. For Agamben, "in the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss" (Agamben, 137)

For Merleau-Ponty the cinema is special because it helps us to see, even more clearly than when we examine everyday perception, how the body image is involved in

understanding what we see. We must find out what is bodily about perception.

Merleau-Ponty compares the gesture and the film, to the extent that the meaning of both are a matter of our ability to experience the world as meaningful in an immediate way, without having to apply another level of conceptual analysis. Merleau-Ponty's problem with *l'analyse reflexive*, we remember, is that the essential starting point is that meaning is applied to an a raw, unmeaning world:

The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm  
just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately  
be read in that gesture: the film does not mean  
anything other than itself. (FNP 58)

The film means nothing other than itself, even though it means to us alone. In other words we do not give the film meaning, but, like the gesture, someone must *experience* meaning in it. We do not decipher the world from the perspective of an isolated understanding, but, due to our bodily existence, by being caught up in the bodily flow and rhythm of the world. The gesture - the contortion of the face which we immediately understand as anger for instance - is a simple analogy for Merleau-Ponty, of how we do not apply a concept *to* our engagement with the world, but, rather, derive concepts from our engagement with the world:

A movie has meaning in the same way a thing does:  
neither of them speaks to an isolated understanding:  
rather both appeal to our power tacitly to decipher  
the world or men. It is true that we lose sight of  
this aesthetic value of the tiniest perceived thing.  
(FNP 58)

This means, as we have been saying all along, that for Merleau-Ponty, meaning has a bodily dimension. The temporal and spatial arrangements are invoked spontaneously in perception. Art, and most specifically here cinema, serves well to show how the body is involved in the way things acquire meaning, for the arrangement of the elements of a film are contained in a closed frame which enhances the perceptual experience. We encounter a rich succession of images, each of which acquires more meaning in relation to the previous frame. In other words it is a concentrated, developing and meaningful object.

The joy of art lies in its showing how something  
takes on meaning- not by referring to already  
established and acquired ideas but by the temporal  
or spatial arrangements of elements. (FNP 58)

The temporal or spatial arrangement the elements of the film are not applied by us, for the very elements we are talking about do not exist outside our relation with objects in the

world. There is nothing beyond the object that means something to us, which we use another, pre-bodily set of categories to decipher.

The meaning of the gesture is not behind it, it is  
intermingled with the structures of the world,  
Outlined by the gesture itself ... as my eyes and  
movements discover the world. (*PP* 185-186)

When we turn to the projection of the body image as a virtual activity by the body, it is clear that the meaning this act allows is not, like the understanding of *l'analyse reflexive*, separate from the act itself.

### 3.2 In-Habiting the Spectacle

To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them. (*PP* 143)

The film is a spectacle. We see it laid out before us. But it is not to a flat screen that we relate, but to space in which we can discern depth, relation between levels (up-down, etc.) We can also, from the appearance on the screen of the back of a person or object, "infer" what the entire object in fact is. We are more familiar with the moving picture than the still photograph; Merleau-Ponty says, "everyone recognizes his own silhouette when

filmed" even though "we have been able to show that we do not recognize our own hand in a photograph" (PP 149). He maintains that "we immediately recognize the visual representation of what is invisible to us in our own body" (PP 149). We, as Merleau-Ponty would put it, "inhabit" the spectacle (PP 250), when we spontaneously project the body image onto it. The spectacle is always, at the same time, a setting. One does not just see the world but in seeing fully inhabits it. Included in "habit forming", then, is "in-habiting" the world. The body concurrently inhabits spatially and temporally. We have seen that the range of activities of the body is extended from direct physical contact by Merleau-Ponty with the unity of the history and possibility of the visual and the tactile: "when I say I see an object at a distance I mean I hold it, it is in the future or in the past as well as being in space" (PP 265).

Because we must inhabit the spectacle in order to understand it, objects "count" as Merleau-Ponty puts it, as non-objective, because, as the phenomenon of counting shows, the body is not an object. The distinction between an objectified body space and phenomenal body space is that while the former's relations are measurable relations the latter is measured by the always *active* expression of the body's attraction for objects. Speaking of our "partial" access to objects in the phenomenal field, (i.e., we never see all the sides of the cube at once) the unseen parts, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "count": "[t]he other parts of the field are not represented to me by some operation of memory or judgment, they are present to me, they count for me" (FNP 51).

The movie provides a setting in which the body as an object of science cannot enter. This

setting or cinematic space, is entered not by the material body, nor by a "body of knowledge", or cognitive functioning. It is, instead, the domain of the virtual body, a concept to which we will now turn.

#### Conclusion: The Virtual Body

With Merleau-Ponty's approach to intentionality, access to the sensible past, and his reintegration in the body of the co-active visual and tactile, the range of the body's possible movements is not available to cognition alone as object, concept or representation. Nor, however, can we look for the significance of the body in its particular movements only, that is, in "measuring" the position and trajectory of the body in relation to other objects. It is the potential for understanding, which is radically indistinguishable from ongoing presence of the body that is at issue. The range of movement is neither an expression of mind (movement is not thought about movement), nor is it a mechanism independent of bodily intentional activity. There must be, then, in the work of Merleau-Ponty a middle term. Again we reiterate the idea that opened this chapter: "[h]abit has its abode neither in thought nor in the objective body but in the body as the mediator of the world" (*PP* 145). How does Merleau-Ponty articulate this "body as mediator"?

The term "virtual" in Merleau-Ponty is more complex than our ordinary understanding of the word as "almost real". It is precisely the distinction and limited choice between the real and the ideal which Merleau-Ponty tries to avoid with the virtual body. The term virtual comes from the Latin word *virtus* meaning power or potency. Merleau-Ponty uses

the term virtual in this sense. The body has a power of possibility, of understanding, which both surpasses and includes the physical. This belief in the body's "power", which as we will see is always expressed in non-positing relational acts with objects, is expressed in perception. Perception, as we have seen, refers for Merleau-Ponty, to an integration of sense experience. Virtual activity is always the coming together of the visual and the tactile. All my senses are used to watch a film, not in a direct sense (I don't touch the screen) but I trace the contours of the objects on the screen with my virtual body. What can this mean? It means that the history of my tactile existence is expressed with every perception and thus bodily experience is the active ground of understanding and meaning.

The film, the ultimate virtual space, serves as a critical test for understanding the virtual body. The film world cannot be reduced in a reflexive sense to the lived world. That is, it is not a strictly a representation of reality. The film is given to us as an *enhancement* of the visible. The flash back, for instance, is something which we all experience in everyday life, but it is never laid out before us in a visual way as it is in the film. The film is not a representation in any meaningful sense, nor is it experienced in a representational way. That is, the film, and to an enhanced degree genres such as sci-fi and animation, offer a new configuration of reality. Because we understand what is happening in a film, we see (in some small way) how meaning cannot be reduced to the lived world in a reflexive sense. Because we understand in a non-representational way, that is, in a way that includes the body-subject's being-towards-the-world, we can inhabit

the world of the film.

Film will be dismissed by some as unsuitable material for discovering the real or true structures of understanding. This is so, however, only when the film experience itself is taken as purely representational, which is achieved through bypassing the presence and situated status of the body. The projected image is given the status of an image-sign for the "real" object: Rosebud on the screen is a representation of the Rosebud in the props room in the studio. Whatever else Rosebud may mean in *Citizen Kane* is, say the psychoanalytic film theorists, added by the viewer and can be reduced to the psychological states the subject brings to the cinema with her. In a similar way, *l'analyse reflexive* assumes that the understanding subject can exist before its encounters with the world. The world can be taken up by this already established subject, who can use representation to understand that which has never seen. In both the case of film theory that has forgotten the visual and philosophy that has forgotten the body, the image is forgotten for representation.

In the cinema, vision and movement discover the world not by covering space (i.e., we do not encounter the image through a purely tactile encounter). Nor do we discover the world as in a purely visual encounter. That is, we do not touch the angles and dimensions of the screen but nor do we just register what we see on the retina. The screen is flat and yet we discern shapes angles, up, down, bars, falling, etc. We do not, Merleau-Ponty would say, see without the element of the tactile in place to make sense of what we see.

Merleau-Ponty claims as one of the aims of the *Phenomenology of Perception* finding a middle term/alternative between the “for me” and the “in itself” (PP 428). “The for me says man is the constituting consciousness, the in itself says he is part of the world. Neither view is satisfactory.” (SN, 72) Neither view is satisfactory because each assumes, but does not include, the pre-reflective fund of bodily experience, that which makes it possible to separate the “for me” and the “in itself” and the first place. The categories “subject” and “object” arise out of this assumption, and all intentional power is given to the subject, wherein lies the possibility of a constituting mind. The body retains the role of object, without intentionality, and is reduced to its mechanisms, one of the “contents” of the subject’s experience. But, Merleau-Ponty writes, and we come back again to the importance of space,

We cannot understand the experience of *space* either in terms of the consideration of contents or that of some pure unifying activity; we are confronted with that third spatiality which is neither that of things in space, nor that of spatializing space. (PP 248, my italics)

In order to understand what Merleau-Ponty means by saying that the body is a mediator in the world, outside the traditional conceptions of the “in itself” and the “for itself” we have to look at what he means by this “third spatiality”. It is, I suggest, a kind of “virtual” body space. It refers to the body (or, more specifically, the body *image*), which

through perception, is projected outward onto the field of its experience. My body is, materially, here in the seat, but it virtually up on the screen- it acts at a distance. The virtual body extends the power of the body in understanding beyond its traditional roles of image machine or movement machine - in short the body is extended beyond the role of transmitter. The virtual unifies mind and body - and along with this, it unifies the psychic image and movement, in consciousness.

Comparing the psychic blindness patient, who can perform only acts that he can represent to himself, to the "normal" person, Merleau-Ponty writes:

The body of the normal person arouses a kind of potential movement rather than an actual one; the part of the body in question sheds its anonymity, is revealed, by the presence of a particular tension, as a certain power of action within the framework of the anatomical apparatus. (PP 109)

The actions of the normal person are at once general (i.e., presuppose a bodily history) and particular, include a "particular tension", a "certain power of action". The notion of a "virtual body", the body which inhabits the spectacle, is one which includes the specific situation and the body's history come together in activity. Where, for instance, does body movement occur in the theater? The alternatives seem clear enough. The bodies of the actors on the screen, or, if we take a microscope, the colors on the screen, the pixels

move. At least they seem, to us, to be moving. Another alternative is - as we said at the start - that we, the spectators move, shifting in our seats, etc. Certainly, these are the only places a representationalist approach would find movement. The significance of movement is not seen here as the relation of body to film but, rather, is conceived in a third person account or analysis of movement. The reason the film is considered a representation in the first place is that, seen "from above", the significance of the body in the theater is measurable (two feet from this wall, moves "us" around, etc.) as well as essentially passive in understanding the movie. In the cinema we are confronted with a situation in which space is not, to put it crudely, explicitly "covered" by the body. Are we left with the other alternative of seeing the body as insignificant, while the mind's representing power takes over? Does this mean an analysis of body movement is insignificant? But, is there not a third body, aside from the one on the screen and the shifting body in the seat? This third body, for Merleau-Ponty, apart from the physical body in the seat that can be (externally) measured and the body on the screen is the virtual body:

What counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal place defined by its task and situation. My body is wherever there is something to be done. (*PP* 250)

Merleau-Ponty's work marks a radical departure from what we often mean for the body to *do* something. We have already seen that intentionality is not exhausted by particular aims, and nor is action. We don't have to catch the body in the present act, it is not "snuffed out when it is not in [a particular] action" (*PP* 435). The notion of action (neither pure, nor motor) is broadened to include the meaning of the body's being *toward* things:

The abstract movement carves out, within that plenum of the world in which concrete movement took place, a zone of reflection and subjectivity; it superimposes upon physical space a virtual or human space. (*PP* 111)

Vision itself aims at things through the body, through its gaze. It is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery in that, since our body, as the potential of this or that part of the world, surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them. (*PP* 106)

The body, under Merleau-Ponty's account of the virtual, takes on a meaning that has often eluded it in philosophical inquiry. That is, it occupies a middle ground between the poles that analysis sets up when it forgets experience. The poles of mind and body,

image and movement, of truth and illusion, of inner and outer. In so doing, Merleau-Ponty's theory of non-representational understanding opens up a new arena for meaning, one in which the body can move, and in which I can watch a film.

### Summary

In this paper, I have examined the relationship between the body and understanding in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In so doing, I have articulated what situated existence and the body subject-object relations inherent in situated existence - means when it is not seen as separate from consciousness or understanding. This articulation reveals Merleau-Ponty's particular contribution to the age old mind-body question. Through the virtual body, and the conception of action at a distance (that is, the union of the visual and the tactile in our oriented understanding of the world) Merleau-Ponty presents us with a new alternative to seeing organization and meaning in terms of either material or mind. He attempts to bring together the realms of intention and operation or action, focusing on possibility rather than articulating the *origins* of meaning and understanding in the cognitive subject. In terms of understanding and meaning, Merleau-Ponty focuses on the subject-world relation (i.e. how it is possible that the world acquires order and meaning for us) rather than order (or, more particularly, how it is that we, as essentially cognitive subjects, bring order and meaning to a raw, meaningless world).

Thus, as I have tried to show, central to the acquiring of meaning is Merleau-Ponty's

focus on presence rather than a form of representational consciousness. Operative intentionality, rather than self-reflexivity, forms the ground of meaning in Merleau-Ponty's work. His rejection of *l'analyse reflexive* is an affirmation of the situated relation between the body and the image, and rejects the reduction of everything to a relation between the cognitive subject and the psychic or mental image, or representation. As my analysis of perception has shown, this body - image relation is always seen within the context of the whole body - world relation - in which the visual and the tactile form one unified body schema. The idea of virtual space articulates this relation between body and world as a manifestation of the body's contribution to understanding.

When we watch a film, the body is involved in a virtual way. However, as I have also tried to show, the virtual body is not limited to the film theater. The body in its virtual manifestation forms the background of all of our experience, and is the working ground of understanding for Merleau-Ponty.

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