

The Rhythm of Expression

Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Form

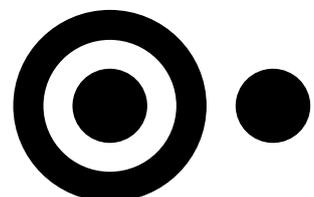
By: Erik Lind

Supervisor: Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback

Södertörn University | School of Culture and Education

Master's dissertation 30 credits

Philosophy | Autumn semester 2019



SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY | STOCKHOLM
sh.se

Abstract

The intent of this essay is to shed light on the relevance and meaning of the concept of "form" in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Drawing on his early texts as well as on the published notes of his first course held at the Collège de France, we argue that the notion of form essentially carries two meanings in the thought of the philosopher. One epistemological, stating that the perceived always assumes the figure-ground structure (signifying a figurative dimension of form). Another ontological according to which form designates the originary manifestation of the world in the event of expression (signifying a genetic dimension of form). Finally, we argue that the interplay of these two dimension of form lead Merleau-Ponty to an intuitive understanding of rhythm as the sensible manifestation of form, suggesting a potentially fruitful encounter, converging upon this notion, with the thought of Henri Maldiney.

Introduction.....	1
Part I.....	7
Refuting the Constancy Hypothesis.....	7
Gestalt and Perception.....	11
The Shortcoming of Gestalt Psychology: Isomorphism.....	18
Structure and Signification.....	22
Incarnation and Kinaesthesia.....	26
The Corporeal Schema.....	32
Motivation: Beyond Causality and Rationality.....	37
Part II.....	43
The Radicalization of Form: Collège de France (1953).....	43
The World of Expression.....	46
Movement as Expression: The Experiments of Max Wertheimer and Albert Michotte.....	48
The Corporeal Schema Redefined.....	51
The Rhythm of Being.....	57
Conclusions and Trajectories.....	66
Summary.....	69
Works cited:.....	72

Introduction

Merleau-Ponty often speaks of the task of phenomenology as that of placing us before the "mystery of the world" and the "mystery of reason." Indeed, his whole philosophical project is in a way concentrated around the task of showing that these two mysteries are in reality one. The experience of the world is the same experience by which we are first initiated to its mystery, which is to say that reason does not pre-exist the world but instead shares with it a profound affinity. It is only a reflection on the world on the condition of simultaneously being a part of this world.

This mystery is linked to the wonder which we are said to feel with the carrying out of the famous phenomenological reduction before the existence of the world such as it is disclosed in the "return to the things themselves." But for Merleau-Ponty the mystery not only provokes wonder but raises the question of the very possibility of this wonder. For him, it becomes a matter of thinking a phenomenological sense of the world which describes also the possibility of its questioning. It is a meaning which is not to be discovered by putting the world at a distance under a reflective gaze, but one which is already experienced and practiced in each instant on the basis of what he calls a "perceptual faith," a primordial evidence of the world disclosed in the very movement of this "return." Philosophy does not begin by asking if we truly perceive the world, but by stating that it is the world that we perceive. Thus, it is in perception that we first gain access to truth because in the primordial evidence of the world we have a knowledge of truth only by first having experienced it. The evidentness of perception is originary and not derived from the ideal of apodictic evidence or the *adequatio* between that which is represented and the experience of this representation. If truth were entirely subjective the question immediately arises how it might be reconciled with an objective reality. As is well known, Kant surmounted this problem by transforming the subject of perception into the transcendental subject, breaking our native relation to the world in order to reconstruct it as the product of our faculties. This idea of truth as adequation thus transforms perception into thought and our originary contact with the world into a thought of the world. But by this transformation, or rather this substitution, philosophy has become unaware of its own beginning.

Herein lies the originality of phenomenology: far from being an attempt to reinstate our access to an "external" world by asking first what makes a world possible – a positing of the being of the world on the basis of the hypothesis of its non-being (what Heidegger termed the persisting "scandal of philosophy") – phenomenological thought is concerned with the world such as it appears *in the appearing itself*. Otherwise put, the appearing is not treated as a given of consciousness (consciousness projecting its being into non-being), but rather as being given to consciousness (being presenting itself as the appearing of a world). Phenomenology thus begins with the givenness of phenomena and the meaning of this givenness signifies nothing else than the appearing of things *as* meaning. Whence the first question of phenomenology: *What does it mean that something appears to us?*

The first part of this question ("What does it *mean* that something appears?") signals the point at which phenomenology diverges from what Husserl calls the "natural attitude," the network of unquestioned suppositions and beliefs that make up the *doxa* of everyday life. Even science, in its attempts to rectify this *doxa* by a certain and secured knowledge (*episteme*) founded upon evidence, rests upon a certain unquestioned supposition regarding the being of the world; namely the *a priori* identification of being with objectivity. It thus presupposes an implicit ontology, the ontology of the object, which substitutes for our originary openness to the world an objectifying procedure that posits a principal adequation between the operation of science and Being. The phenomenological reduction, on the other hand, suspends all judgements by which we posit the objectivity of the world in order to interrogate the meaning of being (*Seinssinn*) of this world, showing thereby that the phenomenal world is originally a world that carries a meaning. In suspending thus the empirical idea of the reality of the world it liberates a transcendental concept of the world, one which carries a meaning only as the "intentional correlate" of an intending subject. This leads us to the second part of the first question of phenomenology ("What does it mean that something appears *to us*?") which is entirely determinant because it informs us that it makes no sense to speak of an appearing otherwise than as an appearing for *someone*. The suspension of the empirical meaning of the world thus indirectly discloses the meaning of subjectivity, not as an object in the world (in the empirical sense), but as the condition of possibility of the appearing as such (in the transcendental sense). The intentional object, therefore, is not a mere sum of "sensations" but a meaningful unity constituted by intentional acts. This is why, to borrow an example from Husserl, when I am listening to a song it is indeed the song that I hear and not just a number of auditive sensations, or, to take an

example from Merleau-Ponty, in looking at a row of trees I see the trees themselves and not the spaces between the trees.

Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty tells us, involves a describing, and not an analyzing or an explaining. This is the first directive of the return to the things themselves, to the world prior to knowledge of which knowledge is always a secondary expression. As soon as it becomes a question of knowing, whether by scientific explanation or by reflective analysis, we substitute a reconstruction of the world for an authentic description. To recall the words of Henri Maldiney, man arrives too late in the theoretical attitude to be contemporaneous with his own origin and his own origin in the world. It appears then that there is a gap between the thing such as it presents itself in the world prior to knowledge and the reflection by which we gain access to the thing as an object of our knowing. In identifying the initial appearing of the thing with its objective double, reflection bridges this gap retroactively by constructing a sustained meaning of the thing that would exclude the possibility of its non-being. But the thing then accedes to the ideal status of being an object for consciousness only because reflection first puts into it what it will later claim to find in it. Because it begins by asking how we may exclude the possibility of non-being, reflection remains incapable of understanding how there can be *being*, in other words how there can be an *openness* toward the world. Now, it is precisely in this latter sense, as Heidegger explains, that phenomenology is literally a *legein ta phainomena* which means a *apophainesthai ta phainomena* – ”to let that which shows itself be seen from itself just as it shows itself from itself.” Phenomenology leads the phenomena to the light of their day, it is what lets them shine through in the patency of their being. Thus, openness opens upon being, including the being of the one for whom there is openness.

Must we then dispense with reflection altogether? Surely not, because in that case phenomenological description would be confounded with a mere empiricist description of natural facts. Rather, philosophy must become hyper-reflection (*sur-réflexion*), Merleau-Ponty claims, meaning a reflection that would not only be able to account for itself and the changes it introduces into the phenomena by its own activity, but also to salvage a certain layer of un-reflective or pre-reflective experience. This is why he will claim that ”The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction.” Nonetheless, the transcendental reduction is our only means of disclosing the essence of the natural attitude. Yet it must also conserve the natural attitude which is our primordial openness to the

world of life, the world prior to knowledge. In the reduction, then, the natural attitude must be both surpassed and conserved. We pass by ideality only to better grasp our own facticity.

The beginning of philosophy is thus to be found in the perpetual commencing of a reflection simultaneously interrogating the world as well as its own interrogation as taking place *in* this world. In this sense, philosophy is not a questioning that seeks knowledge of the world. It is rather "the perceptual faith interrogating itself on itself." For Merleau-Ponty interrogation thus conceived becomes a mode of reflection corresponding precisely to the very depth of the world. Thinking the possibility of reflection in being thus implies thinking being as reflection and reflection as synonymous with the inexhaustible transcendence of being. Understanding the primordial openness to the world is to experience the interrogative presence of the world in its mystery, and how this mystery is none other than that of reason itself.

Now, the faithful description of the phenomena such as they are disclosed in the return to the things themselves leads Merleau-Ponty, in a manner which is entirely unique and significant for his philosophy from its very beginning, to a certain notion of "form." This is a notion which he inherits from the tradition of Gestalt psychology but whose promise as a philosophical concept becomes clear to him even before his introduction to the phenomenology of Husserl. Indeed, as Renaud Barbaras has pointed out, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that "form" occupies the same place in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty as "the thing itself" that Husserl's phenomenology urges us to return to.¹ Because Gestalt psychology shares with phenomenology this fundamental methodological presupposition, namely to deliver a faithful description of the phenomena, it leads us, in manner similar to phenomenology, to a radical revision of the categories that in the natural attitude have determined the philosophical tradition. This is why Merleau-Ponty will claim that the Gestaltpsychological critique of the so-called "constancy hypothesis" held by traditional psychology can be likened to a "genuine phenomenological reduction." Now, if the meaning of philosophy and its possibility are as intrinsically linked to the meaning of the reduction as we have tried to show above, then it would seem that form, designating a phenomenal reality to which we only have access *in* and *by* this reduction, takes us to the

¹ Renaud Barbaras. "Merleau-Ponty et la psychologie de la forme," *Les Études philosophiques*, no. 2, 2001, p. 151.

very heart of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thought. It is for this reason that we propose to make this concept the object of our own investigation.

However, the relationship between the thought of Merleau-Ponty and the Gestaltist legacy is not entirely uncritical. In fact, he repeatedly criticizes different Gestalt theorists for their inability to maintain themselves in the phenomenal space opened up by their descriptions. Reverting to causal explanation they betray the phenomenological imperative of adhering to a strict description and consequently fall back into the natural attitude. In determining Merleau-Ponty's own understanding of form we must first, then, make a distinction between the *psychological question of form* and the *philosophical question of form*. Therefore, the first part of our investigation will be dedicated to clarifying the ground of this distinction – which in reality is an *ontological* distinction; the distinction between an "objective" ontology and an "authentic" ontology – and to identifying what we will refer to as Merleau-Ponty's "phenomenology of form," notably such as it comes to expression in his early works.

Nevertheless, the task of investigating the relevance of the concept of form in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is complicated by the fact that as a concept it is not employed in an entirely univocal fashion by the philosopher. On the one hand it is used critically as a quasi-epistemological concept with the intent of showing at which point the objectivist theories of what he calls "empiricism" and "intellectualism" (two strands of the philosophical tradition roughly corresponding to what we might call realism and idealism) run aground. Because it is committed to the ideal of adequation, objective thought posits an insurmountable barrier between the thing itself and our experience of the thing. In *a priori* identifying the presence of the thing with the act of its presentation it confounds the originary perceptual presence of the thing with its ideal signification. But this identification is only possible on the ground of having first defined presence as essence and presentation as the actualization of essence. Form, in this perspective, confronts us with the following question: *How can we think the identity of the appearance and the appearing thing without compromising their difference?* On the other hand, the notion of form is also used in an ontological sense. If Being originally manifests itself in the appearing then we must think a sense of the appearing that would conserve the openness of the world. The question then becomes: *How can we think the identity of phenomenality and being without sacrificing transcendence?* As we shall show, for Merleau-Ponty both of these questions can only be satisfyingly answered by first asking the question of the *being of form*. In other words, it is only when form

becomes thought positively in its own right that we may approach the question of being on its basis.

We propose therefore to retrace this question in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. More precisely, we wish to show how this question is deployed in two phases of his thought; the first corresponding to the period leading up to and including the publication of his *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945, the second beginning with his first course held at the Collège de France in 1953 entitled *The Sensible World and the World of Expression*. For reasons of simplicity, but also in order to better follow the movement of Merleau-Ponty's thought, our own investigation will follow the same partition. Thus, in the first part we will show how the phenomenal reality of form clarifies the necessary impossibility of completing the phenomenological reduction. Describing our intentional relation to the world, it discloses a transcendental dimension of the phenomena that firmly roots their meaning in the structure of the perceiving subject. Yet it simultaneously shows how this meaning is not contained in the transcendental but that it must rather pass through it in order to disclose a new sense of the natural world, one that Merleau-Ponty explores through the notion of "expression." The second part of our investigation will focus on this term such as it is elaborated in the second phase of the philosopher's thought. As we shall show, the notion of expression undergoes a crucial transformation in the 1953-course, principally in the identification of form with a "diacritical structure," allowing the integration of a dimension of negativity into perception – a true innovation in relation to the first phase of Merleau-Ponty's thought. From an ontological perspective we see how this opens up the possibility, moreover, of thinking a sense of being that would include negativity as *internal* to it. This becomes evident in his understanding of the phenomenon of movement, one which he bases on an interpretation of a number of psychological experiments on the perception of movement, as well as of cinema, understood as an eminently mobile medium of expression.

Lastly, it is on the basis of this expressive function of form that we will propose our own interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's definition of the lived body as an "expressive space." As an expressive space, we suggest, the lived body can be understood as the place of passage where the world comes to itself and begins to exist for itself. This is possible because the body maintains not only a relation with that which is manifestly given in perception but also, and more importantly, with a dimension of the non-given in perception, that is with the unexpected that transcends all that is possible, that which catches us by surprise in breaking our familiarity with the world. In our reading this dimension of the non-given originally

presents itself as a rhythm of appearing, without yet being the appearing of any concrete thing. Thus, we claim, a number of Merleau-Ponty's descriptions point us toward a phenomenological understanding of rhythm as the sensible form of being.²

Part I.

Refuting the Constancy Hypothesis.

The development of Merleau-Ponty's thought is intimately bound up, from its very beginning, with a fascination for a number of psychological currents of his time (he refers to them collectively as the "New Psychology"). The Gestalt psychology of Köhler, Koffka and Wertheimer, but also the neuropathology of Goldstein, the neurology of Head and the neuropsychiatry of Schilder (to name just a few), all provide the philosopher with an indispensable source-material in his on-going interrogation of the perceptual sense of the world. Among these different strands of psychology, it is without a doubt the Gestalt theoretical tradition that provides him with the greatest stimulation of thought, not only in the empirical sense but as a veritable philosophical interlocutor. Indeed, the early development of Gestalt psychology grew out of a mounting dissatisfaction, felt at the turn of the twentieth century, with the traditional concepts of classical psychology and their inability to describe the increasingly apparent complexity of mental life. As a critical discipline, calling for a profound revision of our descriptive categories, one may easily understand the philosophical interest that Gestalt theory could provoke. Now, perhaps the most important concept to be criticized by the Gestaltists is that of "sensation," a concept which – together with its theoretical correlate, the so-called "constancy-hypothesis" – underpins, in one form or another, the objectivist traditions that Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), labels intellectualism and empiricism. It is with this notion that we shall commence our own investigation as it shows us why form becomes a relevant concept in Merleau-Ponty's description of perception.

In fact, the problem that the concept of sensation faces is twofold: First, from a phenomenological point of view, what presents itself in perception is not a series of discrete

² In what follows all translations, unless otherwise stated, are our own.

sensations accessible to us in internal experience as qualitatively determined, but a world of given things more or less clearly defined in a phenomenal field. Certainly, in order for me to perceive something, be it the sight of the cup resting on my desk or the sound of the train passing by outside my window, it is necessary that light should strike my eyes and that sound should penetrate my eardrums in order for these phenomena to be perceived in the first place. But these necessary conditions are not sufficient conditions. Some level of organization must also be presupposed in order to account for how mere physiological and neurological events may acquire perceptual meaning, that is, be articulated into meaningful unities. Secondly, from a theoretical perspective, the traditional concept of sensation – finding itself inserted into an epistemic framework in which it is qualified *a priori* as "sense data," discrete units of experience organized into higher forms of perception or cognition according to elementistic-mechanistic laws of causation and association – lacks sufficient explanatory value on its own if it is to account also for cases in which perception cannot be derived from simple sensations in a univocal and determinate manner. As a consequence, any theory that constructs mental life upon the study of sensations or "sense data" has to be supplemented by ad hoc hypotheses that eventually undermine their own elementistic suppositions. In a sense, the concept of sensation presupposes a certain dualism in maintaining an absolute distinction between the ultimate constituents of experience and the principle of their subsequent organization, a distinction which can ultimately be traced back to the ontological division between the physical and the mental.

Correlatively, what the constancy hypothesis³ postulates is a point-by-point correspondence between local peripheral stimulation (sense impression) and elementary perception or sensation, a constancy in the connection between the elements of a given situation and the elements of the reaction. Or, to put it differently, it maintains that the content of perception is always determined univocally by the stimulation of the sensory organs, such that a given stimulus always gives rise to the same reaction or sensation in the subject. However, there is a plethora of cases in which such a point-by-point correspondence does not occur and much of the theoretical debate of the late 19th and early 20th century revolved around how to reconcile this fact with mechanistic or rationalist explanatory

³ This term (*Konstanzannahme*) was in fact coined by Wolfgang Köhler in "Über unbemerkte Empfindungen und Urteilstäuschungen," *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, vol. 66, 1913, pp. 51-80, in the context of his refutation of Carl Stumpf's theory of "unnoticed sensations" which posited a constancy in the relation between stimulus and sensation.

frameworks. For instance, in cases of optical illusions (such as the Müller-Lyer lines) perception finds itself at odds with what is actually present in sensory stimulation; and in ambiguous perception (illustrated in Rubin's vase or Jastrow's duck-rabbit) a sense datum may occasion one or the other of two equally valid percepts by a mere shift of attitude. How is such a discrepancy between sensation and perception to be accounted for? How do we explain the fact that determinate stimuli may produce indeterminate percepts?

For the tradition that Merleau-Ponty groups under the heading of "empiricism," this discrepancy necessitates auxiliary hypotheses intended to explain it as a function of memory or of association (by reference to past experience). However, these notions only confirm *that* some sensations cause or bring about others, not *how* they do so unless they presuppose some higher order of connection, regularity or order. But in that case empiricism would presuppose precisely that which is to be accounted for and therefore lack any explanatory value. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty points out, it is the inner coherence of the perceived which allows us to associate its discrete elements or aspects in the first place – it is only on account of an originary unity of the perceived thing, prior to any associative or mnemonic functioning, that we can discern resemblances and contiguities. Thus, he concludes, "the unity of the thing in perception is not arrived at by association, but is a condition of association, and as such precedes the delimitations which establish and verify it, and indeed precedes itself."⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, what is capable of bringing about a particular memory or association is not the linking together of isolated sense impressions, but a meaningful phenomenon appearing to a subject who is already familiar with his or her world.

Equally adamant in its reliance upon a theory of sensation, the so-called tradition of "intellectualism" fares no better than empiricism. As committed to the constancy hypothesis as empiricism, intellectualism essentially claims that the order of the perceived is always a synthesis or reconstruction of sensory data effectuated by the mental activity of the mind. Thus, even if we do not perceive that which putatively corresponds to the properties of the stimulus, the intellectualist willingly admits that normal sensations are there all the same. Should there be a discrepancy it would only be the result of the misconstruals and inconsistencies of the will, a fault in the exercise of judgement. In this sense, intellectualism only displaces the two-story theory of empiricism to a higher level, so that instead of a

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 17. Hereafter "PhP."

possible discrepancy between stimulus and sensation we are faced with a possible conflict between sensation and interpretation or judgement. However, maintaining an absolute barrier between our sensible experience and its organization in the faculties of the mind, intellectualism is faced with insurmountable problems. In the case of optical illusions, for example, it cannot explain how it comes to be that the illusion remains in full effect even after it is recognized as such by the intellect. Why does the illusion refuse to be resolved? To answer this question it becomes necessary to accept the possibility that the source of the mistake lies in the underlying sensations that are providing the sensory "stuff" for judgement. But then one has either to assume one or several of the associative-mechanistic theses of empiricism, or postulate the existence of intervening unconscious processes (a thesis that, again, would lack explanatory value because it presupposes the very phenomenon that is to be accounted for). In the end, because intellectualism understands perception as the interpretation of sense data, sensation becomes "purified," being there where consciousness is not, a mute void surrounding the realm of thought. As a consequence, the notion of "pure sensation," becomes an entirely theoretical postulate, invented solely for the purpose of explanation without any justification in actual lived experience.

In short, what both empiricism and intellectualism fail to account for is that "the perceived object gives itself as a whole and as a unity before we have grasped its intelligible law," that this unity is neither the result of association nor of judgement, and finally, that perception is for the most part "unaware of its own reasons" (PhP, 44). Phenomenology, if it is to be a viable alternative to the traditions of empiricism and intellectualism, must be able to account for the "spontaneous organization" and "particular configuration of the phenomena" that we are presented with in perception by strictly adhering to that which is given in experience (PhP, 38). The world of sensory experience must *not* be understood, as Merleau-Ponty often puts it, *partes extra partes*, a totality defined by the absolute mutual exteriority of its parts. It does not consist of objects wholly determined, purified of all ambiguity and surrendering themselves before a thought which would be fully transparent to itself. He repeatedly emphasizes that both empiricism and intellectualism remain blind to the essentially *indeterminate* nature of perception – "the indeterminate is not allowed into the definition of the mind" (PhP, 31) – and therefore fail to grasp that ambiguity is not a *derived* but an *originary* phenomenon. "We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon" (PhP, 7) and only in doing so may we clear a path that avoids "objective thinking." This requires a new conceptual framework, one which lets us understand the

relationship between perception and world as a necessary interrelatedness, as a relation between a sensing and a sensible in which, far from one assuming priority over the other, both terms of the relation are defined by the relation itself. In other words, not only as a relation of *intentionality*, but as a *pre-reflective* form of intentionality proper to sensing or perceiving as such. What Merleau-Ponty is saying is that in recognizing the indeterminate as a *positive* phenomenon we must also reconsider the dimension of its negativity or its absence (its *in-determinateness*) not as a "lack" (which is to say, a possible presence), but as a fundamental trait of our incarnated being in the world. Otherwise stated, the indeterminate must be recognized as a structural feature of the perceived. As we shall see, this recognition amounts to an integration of intentionality to the *spontaneous* or *self-organization* character of the perceptual field, without subordinating the latter to the constituting activity of a transcendental consciousness. In short, the problem with which we are faced in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty is how to include in the phenomenological description indeterminate or ambiguous phenomena without judging their structural incompleteness as a deficient mode of a possible completeness.

Gestalt and Perception.

For Merleau-Ponty, it is specifically in accounting for the ambiguous character of perception, without interpreting it in a pre-established epistemological framework oriented around the ideal of univocity, that Gestalt psychology may aid phenomenology. With the multifaceted notion of Gestalt or "form," signifying also "structure" or "organization," Merleau-Ponty puts a concept to work that is capable of expressing the ambiguity of the perceived without depriving the latter its constitutive indeterminateness. As we shall see, it is by means of a broadened application of the notion of form, comprising not only epistemology but also raising a number of ontological questions, that objective thought may be surpassed in favour of a truly original way of thinking the being of the perceived – a thinking which judges being not by means of some external criterion, but which tries to solve its paradoxes from *within*. This, we have seen, is the very meaning of phenomenological description as *interrogation*. As Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Structure of Behaviour* (1942):

[I]t is not with the help of an external criterion that we will judge the alleged philosophy of form. On the contrary, we would like to return to the notion of form, to seek out in what sense forms can be said

to exist 'in' the physical world and 'in' the living body, and to ask of form itself the solution to the antinomy of which it is the occasion, the synthesis of matter and idea.⁵

It is this "return to form" in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty that will be the object of our own inquiry. There is present, we contend, a sensitivity towards form in the thought of the philosopher that does not simply reiterate classical dichotomies, an intuitive understanding of the sensible world as originally *being* on its way *to form*, revealing, at the most fundamental level of experience, an irreducible dynamism or tension pervading all appearing. As a consequence, this intuition will confront the philosopher, we contend, with the necessity of thinking a rhythmic dimension of the appearing, one in which our primordial contact with the world takes on a concrete meaning in the figure of what Merleau-Ponty calls the "vibration of appearances." It is this ambition to try to think a "figured" meaning of being that unites the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy with the thought of Paul Valéry and Henri Maldiney; two thinkers whose understanding of what we might term the "rhythmicality" of being will serve as inspiration for our concluding analyses.

Now, before moving on to Merleau-Ponty's own understanding of form, we will give a brief account of Gestalt psychology and of its complex and in some respects controversial relation to phenomenology.⁶ In integrating the notion of Gestalt to phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is in fact bringing together two doctrines with a similar field of interest – a field lying on this side of the split of the perceived world into nature, as the world of objects or of pure externality, and consciousness, as an immanent sphere of pure internality. Nevertheless, it was first Gestalt psychology, and not phenomenology, that was to influence the early

⁵ Merleau-Ponty. *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963, p. 137. Hereafter "SB."

⁶ This relation has been described in great detail in an instructive study by Anna-Petronella Foulter, including an extensive and helpful bibliography listing a number of commentators that explicitly deal with the influence of Gestalt theory upon his thought (*Recasting Objective Thought: The Venture of Expression in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Doctoral thesis), Stockholm: Department of Philosophy, Stockholm University, 2015). To our knowledge, no study has gone to greater lengths in re-tracing Merleau-Ponty's notion of form to its Gestalt theoretical origins. However, we take a slightly different view regarding the way in which this concept is deployed in the development of the philosopher's thought. Whereas Foulter tends to emphasize the continuity in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of form, we propose that it is only in his identification of form (following the 1953-course) with a "diacritical structure" that the question of the being of form can be elaborated in sufficient detail.

development of his thought on perception. Thus, already in an early text written in 1934 do we read the following description of the Gestalt:

The "Gestalt" is a spontaneous organisation of the sensory field which has supposed "elements" dependent on "wholes" which are themselves articulated within more extensive wholes. This organisation is not like a form imposing itself upon a heterogenous matter; there is no matter without form: there are only organisations, more or less stable, more or less articulated.

For *Gestaltpsychologie* an object does not stand out because of its "signification" ("meaning") but because it possesses in our perception a special structure: the structure of "figure-ground".⁷

This description corresponds more or less to the standardized definition of the Gestalt according to which it would be "a whole not reducible to the sum of its parts."⁸ The assertion that "there is no matter without form" is intended precisely to avoid the misguided presupposition of the constancy hypothesis which states that matter (stimulus or sense impression) comes to be "informed" either by way of mechanistic association or by the synthetic activity of the mind. To some extent, this misapprehension is avoided by the German "Gestalt" as opposed to its latinized counterpart "form." As Wolfgang Köhler emphasizes, the word "Gestalt" does not only mean the "shape" or "form" of something, but can also designate the *whole* that "has" a form. As a "whole" it has more to do with organization or structure; the particular *dynamics* underlying the appearing rather than the external shape of the appearing itself.⁹ In Gestaltist terms, we do not experience "things," generally speaking, because they *have* forms, but, crucially, because they *are* forms (structures, configurations or organizations).¹⁰

⁷ Merleau-Ponty. "The Nature of Perception," trans. Forrest W. Williams, in *Merleau-Ponty. Perception, Structure, Language: A Collection of Essays*, John Sallis (ed.), New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981, p. 13.

⁸ This is not the same as saying that it is "a whole *greater* than its parts," which is sometimes (erroneously) presented as its definition.

⁹ Wolfgang Köhler. "Human perception" in Mary Henle (ed.) *The selected papers of Wolfgang Köhler*, New York: Liveright, 1971, p. 164.

¹⁰ This is the fundamental difference between the so-called Berlin-school and its understanding of form, and that of its conceptual predecessor Christian von Ehrenfels. According to Ehrenfels – in his seminal 1890 essay "On 'Gestalt Qualities'" – our experience is structured because we find in it certain "Gestalt qualities," *superadded*, as it were, to the sensory elements that our perception consists of. The Gestalt quality is *founded upon* the elementary sensations as an attribute, *alongside* its constitutive elements. According to the Berlin School, however, a collection of data does not *have* a form, it *is* a form in the sense of an integrated dynamic "whole." As Barry Smith puts it: "The significance [...] of the transition from the Austrian theory of Gestalt as *quality* to

Broadly speaking, Gestalt signifies a dynamic incarnated structure, an organization that is neither a simple appearing, nor an abstract idea, but a *concrete configuration*, one which is indissociable from a "material" support, yet capable of being transposed into other configurations. As "form" it stands in a relation to matter as something qualitatively "new," yet it is not the result of an intellectual operation, nor is it a suprasensory "Idea" of which any configuration of psychophysical content would be a mere instantiation. As a "whole" it is not different from the alleged sensory data that it unites, yet it is no mere additive sum of the latter or a pure quantity. In fact, "for a [G]estalt quantity and quality are the same."¹¹ This understanding of Gestalt grew out of a need felt at the turn of the century to conceptually align psychology closer to recent trends in the physical and biological sciences based on the common theoretical terrain of studying "facts of organization." Just as in physics the *field* surrounding atomic particles is taken to be no less "real" than the particles themselves, so psychology, one reasoned, should concern itself not so much with what happens at a "microscopical" level (the study of "sensations," in the sense of a "first" hypothetical matter in perceptual experience, supposedly enclosed within it and accessible in its "pure" state under certain conditions), but rather with the "macroscopical" (molar configurations, the interaction between structures). Thus, the study of perception would from the start be a study of *relations*. As a consequence of this approach, along with the rejection of the constancy hypothesis and the doctrine of psychic atomism, the problem (faced by intellectualism and empiricism alike) of how unity may be achieved in a multiplicity was turned upside down as in principle nonsensical from a phenomenological standpoint. Gestalt psychology is exclusively concerned, at a descriptive level, with accounting for the phenomena as they are given in lived experience, that is, with *what* is given and *how* it is given. Thus, the primal phenomenological material is not a hypothetical sense datum, but the originary structuredness and organization of the appearing thing in the phenomenal field.¹² In other words, perceptual meaning is above all a function of *organization*. Just as the atomic particle is articulated as a function of the field in which it participates, so the appearing phenomenon is always

the Berlin theory of Gestalt as *whole*, cannot be overestimated. The distinction can be seen as parallel [...] to that between dualistic conceptions of man as composed of body and superadded *mind* or *soul*, and conceptions of man as *person*, or in other words as a special sort of structured whole with both mental and physical aspects." *Austrian Philosophy. The Legacy of Franz Brentano*, Chicago: Open Court, 1994, p. 245.

¹¹ Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, London: Kegan Paul, 1936, p. 22.

¹² Max Wertheimer. "Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt. I. Prinzipielle Bemerkungen," in *Psychologische Forschung*, vol. 1, 1922, p. 52.

articulated according to its surrounding phenomenal field. The field, Gestalt psychology theorizes, is always articulated into a figure-ground organization, so that any perceived thing always finds itself spontaneously demarcated against a co-perceived, non-articulated background. Thus, in a landscape photograph we notice the the shapes of mountains, trees and buildings, but not the shape of the sky.¹³ In this sense, the appearance of "wholes" (generally speaking) is as much a matter of division or separation of the phenomenal field as it is a matter of its internal cohesion or unity. All investigations into the nature of perception must proceed from and take into account this originary and irriducible division of perceptual experience. As Merleau-Ponty points out, "[t]he perceptual 'something' is always in the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a 'field.' A truly homogenous area, offering *nothing to perceive*, cannot be given to *any perception*" (PhP, 4). In short, the figure-background structure constitutes the most fundamental way of the phenomenal world's manifesting itself. *Why* certain parts of the field appear as "figure," whereas other parts appear as "ground," *why* we perceive "things" and not "the holes between things," is a matter of immediate organization functioning according to certain Gestalt laws.¹⁴ Accounting for these laws, giving them a valid generality based on empirical observation in carefully devised experiments, is the task that Gestalt psychology sets itself.

Rather than enumerating a list of these laws or principles, we will limit ourselves to mentioning the most general of them – the law of *Prägnanz*.¹⁵ The law of *Prägnanz* states that out of several possible organizations, one will occur that possesses the "best" form in terms of symmetry, stability and simplicity. In this sense, the concept of *Prägnanz* takes up and extends two principles borrowed from physics and mathematics: that of equilibrium by a

¹³ Koffka. *Op. cit.*, p. 209.

¹⁴ These laws cannot be accounted for by empiricism, as they are not the result of habit or association (because the figure emerges "spontaneously" from the ground), nor can they be explained by intellectualism (as the figure equally emerges "immediately," that is, without any interposing of the will or of "attention" – the latter presupposing precisely the phenomenal shift from ground to figure which it is intended to account for). For the figure-ground distinction, *cf.* Kurt Koffka, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-211. For Koffka's critique of the concept of "attention," *cf.* Koffka, "Perception: An introduction to the *Gestalt-theorie*," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 19, 1922, pp. 531-585. *Cf.* also PhP, 7.

¹⁵ This term was first coined as a "Gestalt law" by Max Wertheimer in 1914. *Cf.* Mitchell G. Ash. *Gestalt psychology in German culture, 1890-1967. Holism and the quest for objectivity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 133.

minimization of energy, and that of order by symmetry.¹⁶ This notion grew out of Max Wertheimer's studies on apparent motion (conducted in 1912), in which he demonstrated that two stationary stimuli presented successively at different locations could, under certain conditions, elicit a perceived motion without any "real" motion taking place; that is, give rise to motion without a "mobile." He then proceeded to explain such motion within a Gestalt-theoretical framework, emphasizing the essentially transitive and dynamic nature of phenomena of movement: "Their psychological reality," he explained, "their flesh and blood, as it were, lies in the 'passage across' [...] which cannot be built up out of the ordinary optical properties."¹⁷ In this sense, the phenomenon of apparent motion describes a dynamic reality of the Gestalt which cannot be traced back to static impressions and, as a consequence, cannot be reduced to an additive sum of psychic elements responding to peripheral stimulations (as postulated by the constancy hypothesis). *Prägnanz*, as a principle of this dynamic transitivity of the phenomena, draws our attention to the fact that the field has not only a spatial constitution, but is always the articulation of a spatio-temporal unity. As Koffka would later claim, Wertheimer's experiment had laid a common epistemological ground for a psychology of simultaneity (dealing with form or shape) and a psychology of succession (dealing with melody, rhythm), in ascribing to each of them the same psychophysical characteristics demonstrated by apparent motion.¹⁸ We might add that this was only possible, methodologically speaking, due to a certain "heuristic phenomenalism,"¹⁹ stemming from a commitment to only take for granted the observable and phenomenally given, without postulating any a priori conditions that would relegate some phenomena to the rank of mere

¹⁶ Drawing on such diverse sources as Maxwell's diagrams of electromagnetic fields, Mach's observation in that states of equilibrium tend to be accompanied by regularity and symmetry, and Planck's description of the tendency of processes in physical systems to achieve a maximum level of stability synonymous with a minimum expenditure of energy, Köhler discerned in the laws of physics an equivalent of the psychological principle of *Prägnanz*, leading him to a unified understanding of nature in which the same processes govern the structure of the physical world and the structure of the human mind – an understanding which, as Ash notes, was "as much an aesthetic as a pragmatic enterprise." Ash, pp. 182-86.

¹⁷ "Experimental Studies on Seeing Motion," (trans.) Michael Wertheimer and K.W. Watkins, in Max Wertheimer, *On Perceived Motion and Figural Organization*, (ed.) Lothar Spillman, Cambridge & London: The MIT press, 2012, p. 58.

¹⁸ Ash, p. 131.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

sensory illusions (*Sinnestäuschungen*).²⁰ From this quasi-phenomenologically determined outlook, then, Wertheimer could suspend the dualistic schemata (centered around elementistic-mechanistic presuppositions) of empiricism and intellectualism, and institute a new paradigm of research converging upon the notion of form.

From a Gestaltist perspective we see then how space and movement are equally implied in one and the same organization and, what is more, receive their phenomenal sense from within this organization. Form, understood as an integrating or assimilating unity of the field, has not only a spatial constitution but also a temporal constitution, meaning that its organization is not so much realized according to an already constituted time, but that it is the very organization or formation of time. To put it differently, its "constitution" of time is inseparable from its demanding a certain time of constitution. Form "takes time" to form.²¹ As Victor Rosenthal and Yves-Marie Visetti have explained, time is internal to form as a process of integration, stabilization and presentation by a concatenation of adumbrations, implying a non-punctual structure of the present.²² Now, to understand the Gestalt-structure of temporality one must, in principle, begin with a theory of the field. For the Gestaltists, the being of the field signifies, as we have seen, that in the perception of a given phenomenon there is necessarily a co-perceived "ground" against which it detaches itself or from which it emerges as a "figure." But the emerging of the field itself is determined by the situatedness of an organism in a given environment, the commerce between the two being subject to a perpetual state of renewal. Subject to a "metabolism," a constant exchange between the organism and its environment, the interior of the field with its exterior, we may speak of a genesis of the field itself, just as we have spoken of the emergence of unities interior to the

²⁰ As Wertheimer states in the opening of his article: "One sees motion: an object has moved from one location to another. [...] It is not that one merely sees that the object is now somewhere else than before, and therefore one knows that it has moved, as one knows that the slow hand of a clock has moved. Rather, one actually sees the motion. What is psychologically *given* here?" *Op. cit.* p. 2.

²¹ One could thus speak of a temporalization of form in the writings of the Gestalt theorists. Form *qua* Gestalt would then stand in a firm opposition to the static conceptions of form of antiquity, such as the external shape (*μορφή, forma*) or the non-sensible idea (*εἶδος*) of a visible manifestation. In fact, as Ash points out, the Gestaltists were inspired to a large degree by the natural philosophy of Goethe, often citing him approvingly. In the morphology of the latter, "Gestalt" refers to the self-actualizing wholeness of organic forms, indicative of an ongoing process of formation (*Bildung*) in which order realizes itself in nature without appeal to any ordering mind (Ash, pp. 85-86). Köhler expressly evokes Goethe's understanding of Gestalt in order to differentiate it from the common meaning of "form" (Köhler. "Human Perception," p. 164).

²² Victor Rosenthal, Yves-Marie Visetti, "Sens et temps de la Gestalt," *Intellectica*, vol. 1, no. 28, 1999, p. 179.

field.²³ Conceiving of the Gestalt in this sense, that is, as a dynamical whole comprising not only the particular unity of the appearing phenomenon but also its constant exchange with a fluctuating field of appearing (a permanent differentiation of what is "internal" and "external" to the field), leads us to conceive of another type of intelligibility of the appearing phenomena – one which must be thought in its own right without being subordinated to an objectivist approach (the latter only seeing, in this genesis of form, an obscure moment towards a conceptually or materially determined end-product). It is this intelligibility, denoting the being of the appearing in its "nascent" state, that we would like to interrogate in order to posit the question of form anew – not within the objectivist confines of a psychology of form, but following what we shall refer to below as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of form. In order to do so, however, we must first ask ourselves just in what respect the psychology of form fails to meet the philosophical standards that Merleau-Ponty sets himself in his critique of "objectivism."

The Shortcoming of Gestalt Psychology: Isomorphism.

One may discern a certain phenomenological commitment in the descriptions of the Gestaltists. Form is neither superadded to the phenomena, nor is it an a priori law or the condition of possibility of their appearing. Rather, it designates the *mode* of appearing of the phenomenon, the *manner* in which it presents itself in lived experience, as in principle indiscernible from what is phenomenally *given*. Thus, the concern with letting the description be strictly guided by what is actually given in experience is one that it shares with phenomenology. Nevertheless, it has been claimed that the Gestalt idea of the Berlin school was, theoretically speaking, never truly "mastered," and that it simply lacked the philosophical framework necessary for ontologically clarifying the Gestalt concept.²⁴ Husserl certainly shared this sentiment. In the "Nachwort" to his *Ideen* he explicitly states that Gestalt psychology, for all intents and purposes, remains subject to a form of naturalism in which "psychic being [...] is to be considered a course of events similar to natural ones." In this regard...

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²⁴ Smith, p. 278.

...it makes no difference [...] whether one lets the psychic data be blown into aggregates "atomistically," like shifting heaps of sand, [...] or whether they are considered parts of wholes which [...] can behave individually only as such parts within a whole [...]. In other words, atomistic psychology, as well as Gestalt psychology, both retain the sense and the principle of psychological "naturalism" [...] or "sensualism."²⁵

Merleau-Ponty offers a similar diagnosis of the short-comings of Gestalt psychology. Because it still relies upon causal derivation in its epistemological concerns, it remains attached to the natural attitude of science: It returns, we are told, "to an explanatory psychology whose ideal Gestalt theory never abandoned because, like psychology, it never broke with naturalism. But in the same stroke, Gestalt theory betrays its own descriptions" (PhP, 48). Presumably, the naturalism which Merleau-Ponty has in mind is the theory of "Psychophysical isomorphism," first conceptualized by Köhler, which states that there is a structural similarity between physical and psychological processes and that the former ultimately explain the nature of the latter. At a Gestalt level, the theory states, the phenomenal experience of the subject could be said, in principle, to correspond to something physically similar in a hypothetical brain observation.²⁶ As a consequence, having formerly described a *phenomenal* reality, the notion of Gestalt therefore comes to describe a *physical* reality, objectively related to the perceptual process on the basis of a hypothetical-deductive model. This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty objects to, since in positing isomorphism, the atomism at first refuted by Gestalt theory in its attack on the constancy hypothesis is merely transposed to a higher level. Rather than having a correspondance between "physical atoms" and "psychic atoms" (stimuli and reactions), we are left with a correspondance of *structures* and consequently remain trapped in the etiological framework of a realist or naturalist ontology.²⁷ The failure of Gestalt psychology would thus lie in its having extracted a theory of form from a ready-made physical universe, rather than adhering to the phenomena themselves. In sum, Gestalt theory does not pose radically enough the question of the *being* of form:

²⁵ Edmund Husserl. "Epilogue," in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book. Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, (trans.) Richard Rojcewicz & André Schuwer, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, pp. 423-24.

²⁶ Köhler, *Die Physischen Gestalten in Ruhe und im stationären Zustand: Eine naturphilosophische Untersuchung*, Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1920, pp. 192-93.

²⁷ As Anna Petronella Foulter aptly points out, in comparing a *descriptive* and *aesthetic concept* with an *economic principle* we are, in effect, no longer speaking of the same phenomenon. *Op. cit.*, p. 108.

We do not think that the notion of Gestalt is pursued to its most important consequences [...]. Instead of wondering what sort of being can belong to form [...], is is placed among the number of events of nature; it is used like a cause or a real thing; and to this very extent one is no longer thinking according to "form." (SB, 136-37)

It seems to us that the main dividing line between Gestalt theory and phenomenology runs along the status of the phenomenological reduction; to what end it is to be employed and how it affects the validity of that which is disclosed in its process. From the viewpoint of the Gestaltists, the procedure in the phenomenological reduction of "bracketing" all that which is not immediately given to "pure" consciousness is unjustified in that it impoverishes the phenomena by depriving them of their objective value, leading to an unwarranted subjectivism in service of an ontological idealism. As Köhler remarks:

I do not believe that we are justified in putting certain phases of experience in brackets. A first account of experience ought to be given and carefully studied without selections of any kind. It is otherwise to be expected that even if the brackets are introduced as mere methodological tools, they will sooner or later turn out to be weapons of an ontological prejudice. In fact, I am not sure whether Husserl himself has not used them as such weapons.²⁸

Conversely, from a Husserlean perspective, adopting a phenomenological attitude means becoming aware of the dimension of givenness of objects as necessarily correlated to a dimension of subjective accomplishment. Phenomenology does not study the mind or consciousness as a psychophysical mundane object or a *part* of the world, but as a *relation* to the world – not in a realist or causal sense, but as an *intentional* and as a *constitutional* relation. With the reduction, phenomenology becomes a transcendental discipline disclosing the constitutive dimension of consciousness understood as a condition of possibility for meaning, validity, truth, and so on. Thus, the meaning of any given object must necessarily be understood in relation to the meaning-bestowing acts of the transcendental consciousness. As Husserl affirms, "a concrete description of the sphere of consciousness as a self-enclosed sphere of intentionality [...] has a totally different sense than [...] the exemplary descriptions in the descriptive natural sciences."²⁹ In treating consciousness as an ontically given *thing*, Gestalt psychology would consequently remain ineluctably blind to the constitutive aspect of the intentional relation.

²⁸ Köhler. "Value and Fact," in *Selected Papers*, p. 363, n.1.

²⁹ Husserl. *Op. cit.*, p. 424.

It seems, then, that a philosophy of form, if it is to avoid the twofold danger of empiricism and intellectualism, must be able to reconcile, at some level of its analysis, the non-constituted reality of form with a certain intentional dimension of its appearing. "Perception," simply put, denotes for Merleau-Ponty the realm of experience in which these dimension are not mutually exclusive categories but two sides, as it were, of the same phenomenal reality. This leads him towards the selfsame dynamism of the phenomenal world with which the Gestaltists were concerned, but without naturalizing it in an explanatory framework – precisely because its appearing must be intentionally given as an appearing *to someone*. In fact, contrary to Husserl's reading, Merleau-Ponty declares that Gestalt psychology is a discipline *founded* on the concept of intentionality.

Gestalt theory is a psychology where everything has a sense. There are no psychic phenomena that are not oriented toward meaning. In this sense, it is a psychology founded on the concept of intentionality. The meaning which inhabits all psychic phenomena does not originate from a purely mental activity; it is an autochthonous meaning which constitutes itself on the basis of "elements."³⁰

In Merleau-Ponty's reading, the self-constituting or "autochthonous" meaning of the phenomena and their intentional nature somehow imply each other, without us having to posit any structural parallelism between the lived forms of experience and the external forms of the physical world. Founding the notion of form upon the concept of intentionality means strictly delimiting its validity to the realm of appearing and, furthermore, to emphasizing that "form" must always take the form of "something" appearing to "someone." On the other hand, if meaning is autochthonous then it would seem that it does not stem from the meaning-bestowing activity of the transcendental consciousness but from the appearing world itself. How then is the claim of autochthonous organization compatible with a theory of intentionality? Before answering this question it is important to underscore that organization, for Merleau-Ponty, is not an *objective* feature of experience. That is, the organization of the phenomenal field is neither physical nor psychological, but a configuration of *meaning*. Indeed, from a Husserlian perspective, it is only when reflecting upon the noematic status of the phenomena that we leave behind the natural attitude of psychology and enter the realm of transcendental description. According to Merleau-Ponty, however, the being of the perceived has a more fundamental meaning than that which is disclosed in the noetic-noematic correlation. As he clearly remarks in one of his later texts: "There must be beings for us

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty. *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*, trans. Talia Welsh, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010, p. 330.

which are not yet kept in being by the centrifugal activity of consciousness: [...] the series of retro-references (*Rückdeutungen*) which lead us ever deeper could not possibly reach completion in the intellectual possession of a noema."³¹ If meaning is autochthonous, then this means that, in a sense, it arises "on its own," without originating in any mental faculty or accomplishment of a transcendental subjectivity. Meaning is not strictly speaking "formed," but "forms" itself in the phenomenal field. On the other hand, founding the notion of form upon a theory of intentionality means acknowledging that its validity is tied to a certain dimension of the transcendental and, above all, to emphasizing that the phenomenon must always take the form of "something" appearing to "someone." The status of this "someone" in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of form is something to which we shall return below. Presently, however, the problem around which Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of form gravitates can be formulated thus: How do we reconcile the autochthonous meaning of the phenomenon with a theory of intentionality? In what sense is there a transcendental dimension of form?

In the next part of our investigation we will further articulate this problem by drawing on what is indubitably the most ambitious work of the philosopher, *Phenomenology of Perception*. First, we will describe in greater detail in what resides the intentional structure of form. Secondly, and more importantly, we will show why Merleau-Ponty must ultimately ask the meaning of form on the basis of the phenomenon of incarnation, raising the question of how one is to account for a *concrete* meaning of form tied to the structure of the lived body (involving an irreducible dimension of contingency and facticity) without lapsing thereby into some form of realism or naturalism.

Structure and Signification

Already in *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the beginning organization of the perceived, a meaning which is still, as it were, *in statu nascendi*:

What is profound in the notion of "Gestalt" from which we started is not the idea of signification but that of *structure*, the joining of an idea and an existence which are indiscernible, the contingent

³¹ Merleau-Ponty. "The Philosopher and his Shadow," in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 165.

arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning in our presence, intelligibility in the nascent state. (SB, 206-7).

There are several points to be made about this passage. First of all, form deals with *relations* rather than isolated elements and these relations are not thought, but perceived. Form is not something enclosed in the material order, but designates the arrangement by which this order begins to make sense. It is not a physical reality, but the specific dynamics of a system or of a totality. In short, being neither thought nor object, it designates the intrinsic organization of the phenomenal field. Secondly, in distinguishing form *qua* "structure" from "signification," Merleau-Ponty draws attention to the fact that form must *not* be understood as the actualization of a pure meaning that would terminate the work of manifestation in the idea or the limit-form of some determinate, fully realized being, since, as he later puts it, "[i]n actual perception, taken in its nascent state [...] the sensible sign and its signification are not even ideally separable" (PhP, 40-41). But this means above all that the intentionality involved in describing the nascent state of meaning, the autochthonous sense of the organization of the perceptual field, cannot be that of objectifying or "thetic" acts. Instead, adopting a Husserlian term, Merleau-Ponty will emphasize the importance of so-called "functioning" or "operative" (*fungierende*) intentionality. As he explains in the preface to *Phenomenology*, whereas act intentionality (or "thetic" intentionality) is the intentionality of our judgements and voluntary decisions, operative intentionality is the intentionality of our desires, evaluations and of our *situation* in the world, establishing "the natural and pre-predicative unity of the world and our life." Intentionality thus conceived turns phenomenology towards a phenomenology of genesis, it turns understanding not towards the individual properties of things but towards "the unique manner of existing expressed in the properties of the pebble, the glass, or the piece of wax," their "unique formula of behavior" and "manner of articulating the world" (PhP, "Preface," lxxxii).

To put it in a somewhat simplified manner: Whereas thetic intentionality is directed towards significations, operative intentionality is directed towards structures. As Merleau-Ponty explains, I do not first recognize the circle because of its formal definition, but because it confronts me as a *Gestalt*, as an open-ended situation or as a problem to be solved:

[W]hat constitutes the difference between the Gestalt of the circle and the signification "circle" is that the latter is recognized by an understanding that engenders it as the place of equidistant points from a center, while the former is recognized by a subject who is familiar with his world and capable of grasping it as a modulation of this world, as a circular physiognomy. (PhP, 453)

Prior to its *formal* essence, I grasp the *concrete* essence of the circle, "which is not a collection of objective 'characteristics,' but rather the formula of an attitude, a certain modality of my hold on the world, in short, a structure" (PhP, 406). The distinction between the simple form of the circle, the circle such as it presents itself as a physiognomy (its unique manner of dividing the plane, the regularity traced by its curve, etc.) and its mathematic definition or signification " (e.g. "an area of points equidistant from a center") corresponds, then, to the distinction between "structure" and "signification," and the manner in which we direct ourselves towards this circle, the attitude that we adopt in relation to it, ultimately goes back to the distinction between operative and thetic intentionality.

To resume, the problem with which we are here reconstructing is that of accounting for an emerging meaning of the perceived without positing its origin in the equally discriminating and synthesizing activity of a reflective mind. Proposing an operative intentionality that would answer to the perceived at a "structural" level would seem to indicate a first step towards overcoming this problem. Nevertheless, in replacing "signification" with "structure," are we not merely displacing the problem in question? Are we not simply reinstating some operative law or principle at a more fundamental level, postulating a *ratio* at the heart of perception which *a fortiori* would be capable of being explicated at the level of reflection and recast into eidetic form? Instead of making comprehensible the relation between facticity and ideality, we would then simply be transposing ideality "ready-made" into the very fabric of facticity. As a consequence, the relation between consciousness and world would be reduced to an envelopment of the latter by the former, effectively rendering ideality indistinguishable from facticity. However, such a conclusion would ignore a fundamental trait of the Gestalt, as Merleau-Ponty explains:

But if the Gestalt can be expressed by an internal law, this law must not be considered as a model according to which the phenomena of structure are realized. Their appearance is not the outward deployment of a preexisting reason. "Form" is not privileged in our perception because it achieves a certain state of equilibrium, resolves a problem of maximization, or makes a world possible (in the Kantian sense), but rather because form is the very appearance of the world, not its condition of possibility. It is the birth of a norm, not realized according to a norm; it is the identity of the exterior and the interior, not the projection of the interior into the exterior. (PhP, 61-62)

Thus, the Gestalt of the circle can indeed be qualified as its "law" (alongside its mathematical law) but only if we understand this law as something which is not extraneous to that which is expressed by it. The "form" of the circle, we could say, must not be confused with its "formal

definition.” Nor is it to be confounded with ”form” in the Kantian sense, that is in the sense of being a ”pure form” of sensibility (i.e. the form of an ensemble of conditions that make possible the phenomenon). These latter conditions or forms are ”pure” in the sense of being ”without” or ”before” matter, determining *a priori* the ways in which we can be affected by matter. Now, this is not at all what Merleau-Ponty has in mind because, as emphasized in the citation above, a Gestalt or form is ”the very appearance of the world and not the condition of its possibility.” Finally, form does not designate the fully constituted or determined thing, individuated in a point of space and time, but rather the emerging of the thing such as it is indicated by its manner of dividing space and time. Thus, in following the Gestaltist definition of form as a whole which does not coincide with the mere sum of its parts, Merleau-Ponty is affirming the coinciding of its reality with its phenomenality. The circle does not ”stand out” because it possesses in relation to our faculty of judgement a certain signification; it stands out because it resounds within us as perceiving subjects, because we are already familiar with the world and because it is but a certain modulation of this world. It signifies not a supra-sensory idea, accessible to reflection alone and which would coordinate its sensory aspects, but a certain ”symbolism” of the sensible, ”a language which teaches itself, and in which the meaning is secreted by the very structure of the sign,” inhabiting the thing ”as the soul inhabits the body.” As Merleau-Ponty affirms, ”it is not behind appearances,” it is given to us ”in flesh and blood,” (PhP, 333) – ”*leibhaft gegeben*,” as Husserl would put it. It is, we could say, not only given *in* the flesh but also, and correlatively, *to* the flesh:

Prior to other persons, the thing accomplishes this miracle of expression: an interior that is revealed on the outside, a signification that descends into the world and begins to exist there and that can only be fully understood by attempting to see it there, in its place. Thus, the thing is the correlate of my body and, more generally, of my existence of which my body is merely the stabilized structure. The thing is constituted in the hold my body has upon it; it is not at first a signification for the understanding, but rather a structure available for inspection by the body. And if we want to describe the real such as it appears to us in perceptual experience, we find it burdened with anthropological predicates. Given that relations among things or among the appearances of things are always mediated by our body, then the setting of our own life must in fact be all of nature; nature must be our interlocutor in a sort of dialogue. (PhP, 333-34)

This brings us to the essential role played by the living body in clarifying the meaning of the Merleau-pontian notion of ”form.” Indeed, it is only when posed on the basis of incarnation that the question of form may be situated at a level not determined beforehand by the

epistemic framework of objectivist thought. Reflection, rather than distancing itself from the world, is thus obliged to consider its own situation in the world. To put it in the words of Barbaras:

The form poses the problem [...] of a phenomenality indiscernible from brute existence, of sense retained in the thickness of a matter and, consequently, of a consciousness which is capable of passivity and thus inscribed precisely in that which it makes appear; that is why the problem of perception, posed on the basis of form, merges with the problem of incarnation.³²

To resume: in pursuing, with Merleau-Ponty, the problem of how to account for the phenomenal reality of form (its relative autonomy) without thereby ignoring a certain transcendental dimension (its anthropological orientation), we are led to the central significance of the operating intentionality. This intentionality, directed towards structures rather than significations, describes a lived unity with the world in which the latter originally manifests itself as a certain modulation or variation of the phenomenal field and of which the appearing spectacle is always the more or less stabilized figure. However, as an intentional relation the appearing still takes the form of something appearing to someone. This "someone" is now identified by Merleau-Ponty with the lived body (*le corps propre*), a pre-egological unity which is synonymous with "the subject," as it were, "of perception" (PhP, 322 n. 23). As we shall see, it is particularly the study of the motricity of the lived body that allows Merleau-Ponty to qualify its unity as an *existential* unity; the unity of a being-in-the-world. Therefore, it is to the role played by the body in articulating this intentional dimension of form that we will presently turn in our investigation.

Incarnation and Kinaesthesia.

For Merleau-Ponty, the lived body takes on a level of concreteness which becomes significant in its own right. The lived body – in Husserlian terms, the *Leib* such as it is distinguished from the *Körper* – is not just any object whose properties could be exhaustively described in physicalistic terms. It is not just a part of the world, but an *experience* of the world. It is a body whose meaning does not offer itself to thought but can only be *lived*. Neither *res cogitans* nor a pure *res extensa*, it is a "third term," comparable to the Cartesian

³² Art. cit., p. 156.

union of body and soul which must be thought *sui generis*, not as an object of understanding (as in the clear evidence whereby body and thought offer themselves as separate substances), but as one of experience alone. Indeed, we can only clearly apprehend the nature of external or Cartesian space in the light of its evidence against the "darkness" of our incarnated situatedness in the world: "Bodily space can be distinguished from external space and it can envelop its parts rather than laying them out side by side because it is the darkness of the theater required for the clarity of the performance [...] the zone of non-being *in front of which* precise beings, figures, and points can appear" (PhP, 103). What is more, the terms "in front of" and "against" only become distinguishable from "under" and "beside" in virtue of their one unique reference point, the lived body or body proper by which space itself becomes oriented by a kind of "anthropological contribution". In other words, external space is always already organized in such a way as to constitute an organic whole, a whole whose parts mutually imply and suggest each other within the meaning-horizon of our body as their unique reference point. In a sense, then, the lived body is a Gestalt (PhP, 102) demonstrating a characteristic anteriority of its organic unity vis-à-vis its constitutive parts. But this identification is merely superficial as long as we maintain a third-person perspective on the body. However, as we shall see, the qualification of the body as "lived," or (literally) our "own" (*propre*) reveals a more radical significance of this identification, one which can only properly be described as "existential." In fact, this "ownness" of the body is characterized by Merleau-Ponty as a "metaphysical necessity" that no phenomenological description can afford to ignore:

I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, inspect them, and walk around them. But when it comes to my body, I never observe it itself. I would need a second body to be able to do so, which would itself be unobservable. When I say that I always perceive my body, these words must not be understood in a merely statistical sense, and there must be something in the presentation of one's own body that renders its absence, or even its variation, inconceivable (PhP, 93)

The necessity of our having only *one* body, the body that *we are*, far from being a merely factual or physical constraint, is a condition of possibility of our being-in-the-world. Such, then, is the transcendental meaning of our openness to the world: Being at once sensing and sensible, seeing and visible, touching and touchable, the lived body is a perspective *on* the world only in so far as it simultaneously a part *of* the world. Inversely, the status of the body as a part of the world can only be upheld if it is simultaneously that which is withdrawn from the world as its essentially non-objectifiable reverse side. The body, according to Merleau-

Ponty, must be understood as a reflective space, a space of non-coinciding in which it is only present to itself across a certain irreducible distance (the impossibility of me seeing my seeing, of me touching my touching) – a distance which is the mode of existence of the lived body in so far as it is always sensing-sensed. As Barbaras explains: "The incarnation of perception signifies that it cannot be distinguished from the world that it brings to appearance. By giving itself a body, sensibility descends into the world and makes itself world, and only on this condition can the world as world be reached."³³ Across this reflective space, "between the two leaves of my body," as Merleau-Ponty will later put it, there is "the insertion of the world,"³⁴ the presence of something which necessarily escapes my grasp, something which I cannot encompass but which instead encompasses me and exposes me to the world in my incarnated existence. Moreover, if the affective reality of this condition tends to be overshadowed in the course of our day-to-day experience, there nevertheless exist certain liminal experiences in which it is felt as such, which is why Merleau-Ponty takes such a keen interest in neurological disturbances such as "heautoscopy" or "asomatognosia," conditions in which the afflicted person may no longer recognize a body part as his or her own, or the frequently reported experience among painters of having a feeling that "things look at them." Being in this way *immersed* in the world through my body, my general means of having a world, there is thus, correlative to my becoming world by means of my body, a becoming body of the world – a sensible meaning at the heart of the sensible world itself which does not result from the synthetic acts of the mind, but rather precedes them. This incarnated meaning is described by Merleau-Ponty, borrowing an expression from Husserl, as a "Logos of the aesthetic world" (PhP, 453).³⁵

Now, before proceeding any further along the lines that we have staked out thus far, we must first turn to the roots of this Husserlian expression by briefly outlining the basic principles of what Husserl calls his "transcendental aesthetics," dealing above all with a particular type of bodily self-sensitivity that is co-functioning in all perception, one in which we are given the world in "pure experience," "without which the unity of a Nature, the unity

³³ Barbaras. *The Being of the Phenomenon*, (trans.) Ted Toadvine & Leonard Lawlor, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 155.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 264. Hereafter "VI."

³⁵ Husserl. *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, p. 292.

of a world, as a passively synthesized unity, could not become constituted at all.”³⁶ He terms this unthematic experience of our bodily co-functioning ”kinaesthetic” experience, dealing above all with the role played by bodily *motility* (the movement of the eyes, the experience of touch, the positions and muscle-tensions of the parts of the body) in the constitution of our perceptual world.³⁷ Husserl claims that all perceptual appearance is accompanied by an unthematized kinaesthetic experience without which the object, as a ”something” that transcends its momentary appearances or adumbrations, could not be given in its persisting unity.³⁸ Thus, in order for the object to be constituted as such in thetic consciousness, it is necessary (albeit not sufficient) that *several* perspectives intermingle or merge with one another in a pre-thetic, kinaesthetic experience so that it may be given as a *unitary* thing *across* its manifold appearances. To quote Dan Zahavi, ”it does not make sense to speak about an appearance (as different from that which appears) unless there are more than one appearance.”³⁹ That which makes possible the continuity or the intermingling of perspectives is precisely the kinaesthesia of the body. Perception is *essentially* kinetic, meaning that if there is to be perception of a ”thing” properly speaking, there *must* be a movement, whether this movement belongs to the thing or to the body of the perceiving ego.

This important fact holds generally. In our case, it means that an identical and unchanged spatial body demonstrates itself as such only in a kinetic series of perceptions, which continually brings to appearance the various sides of that thing. The body must rotate or be displaced, or I must move, move my eyes, my Body, in order to see it from all around, and at the same time I must keep approaching it and receding. Or, finally, both I and the thing must move.⁴⁰

For Husserl, the internal horizon of the perceived object, that is, its absent aspects, are always correlated to the kinaesthetic horizon of the perceiving subject (the system of its possible movements). These corresponding horizons describe an intentional ”if-then” relation, provided that the intentional unfolding of this horizon occurs harmoniously. Moving this way, one aspect of the perceptual thing will appear, moving that way, another aspect

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cf. Husserl. *Ideas II*, §18, pp. 60-94.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 70f.

³⁹ Dan Zahavi. ”Husserl’s Phenomenology of the Body,” in *Études Phénoménologiques* No. 19, 1994, p. 67.

⁴⁰ Husserl. *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997, p. 132.

becomes accessible, and so on.⁴¹ For Husserl the subject of perception is therefore necessarily an embodied subject and, furthermore, a subject who is capable of movement, indeed who must *essentially* be a mobile subject if the unity of the perceived world is to be possible at all. As Jean-Sébastien Hardy explains in a recently published study: "The 'body' of the intrawordly thing is constructed by the intervention of a free effectuation of kinaesthetic potentiality."⁴² The body's kinaestheses play the role, therefore, of a condition of possibility with regard to the constitution of the object as such and perceptual reality in general.⁴³

In short, for Husserl the lived body has the function of a necessary condition for the constitution of the perceived thing as a unitary and identical object. As a kinaesthetic potentiality, the lived body allows us to apprehend the percept as *something*, although not yet necessarily *this* or *that* thing. Similarly, for Merleau-Ponty, it is only when we take into account the distinction between the movements of intra-wordly beings and the self-movement of our own embodied being that we may fully grasp the relation of dependence between movement and perception. It is by moving around in the world as finite bodily beings that we may have an experience of this world. Perception and (self-)movement thus presuppose one another and are, as he puts it at one place, "synonymous" (VI, 255). But whereas for Husserl the body's kinaestheses primarily play the role of a condition of possibility with regard to the constitution of the object in perception, "the intentional background of every straightforward ontic certainty of a presented thing,"⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, for his part, goes even further, suggesting that there is a kind of "knowledge" proper to motility as such: "The motor experience of our body is not a particular case of knowledge; rather, it offers us a manner of reaching the world and the object, a 'praktognosia' that must be recognized as original, and perhaps as originary" (PhP, 141).

To better understand what he has in mind in evoking this concept we must bear in mind one subtle but nevertheless crucial difference between Husserl's approach and that of

⁴¹ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970, pp. 106; 161f.

⁴² Jean-Sébastien Hardy. "Sens du mouvement et kinesthèse. La Découverte du 'Concept phénoménologique de mouvement' dans *Chose et Espace* de Husserl," in Sylvain Camilleri et Jean-Sébastien Hardy (eds.), *Ens mobile. Conceptions phénoménologiques du mouvement*, Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2018, p. 33.

⁴³ Husserl. *Thing and Space*, p. 148; *Ideas II*, p. 61; *Crisis*, p. 162; Zahavi. *art. cit.*, p. 66.

⁴⁴ *Crisis*, *ibid.*

Merleau-Ponty. Whereas in the transcendental aesthetics of the former the identity of the object is ultimately apprehended across a kinetic series of perceptions, its unity being the achievement of the free effectuation of kinaesthetic potentiality (that is, a *constituted* identity, the identity of an *object*),⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty for his part distances himself from the task of accounting for the possibility of identity in perception since it occasions the noetico-noematic distinction of which he is critical. Rather, the identity and unity of the thing is taken as *preceding* the bifurcation of the perceived into the actual and the possible, existence and essence. For Husserl, the transcendence of the thing signifies that the thing "itself" is irreducible to the perspectives on it. Its being is *beyond* its profiles or, to put it differently, its unity transcends its mode of appearing (which, in the eyes of Husserl, permits us to recognize a thing as an independent thing precisely because it resists the grasp of our apprehension in withdrawing its hidden aspects from us – the profile being both the appearance of the thing and its disappearance). From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, however, unity is not so much constituted as it is constitutive of any experience we may have, as he points out in a reading note: "Error of [Husserl]: to believe that the identity of the thing results from the *Einstimmigkeit* of the appearances (that is reflective). It does not result from it, it precedes it. The unity of the thing is not constructed on appearances: it is implicated in each partial appearance, which would be other if it was not part of the thing."⁴⁶ Simply put, to maintain that the object is simply the cohesion of appearances is to affirm that no appearance *is* the thing and, as a consequence, that the thing is itself extraneous or exterior to that which makes it appear. As a consequence, the originary movement of appearing would be overshoot in favour of that which has appeared.

On the other hand, the "praktognosia" of which Merleau-Ponty speaks signifies the unity of a praxis or of an action by which the body first relates to the world across a "motor

⁴⁵ As Eugen Fink points out, the thing itself (as the theme of the phenomenology of Husserl) is not the being such as it is in itself, but the being which is essentially object. "L'analyse intentionnelle et le problème de la pensée spéculative." *Problèmes actuels de la phénoménologie*, (ed.) H.L. von Breda, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952, p. 69.

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty. "Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch's *The Field of Consciousness*," trans. Elizabeth Locey & Ted Toadvine, *Husserl Studies*, vol. 17, 2001, p. 180. It should be noted, however, that in *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty still hesitates regarding this point. For instance, he at one point writes that the "horizon [...] is what assures the identity of the object throughout the exploration," as "the correlate of the imminent power my gaze has over the objects" (PhP, 70). As we shall see, it is precisely with this tendency to idealize perception that Merleau-Ponty will attempt to break in his later thought.

project” or a ”motor intentionality.” To understand what he has in mind, let us consider the following example:

When I motion to my friend to approach, my intention is not a thought that I could have produced within myself in advance, nor do I perceive the signal in my body. I signal across the world; I signal over there, where my friend is. The distance that separates us and his consent or refusal are immediately read in my gesture. There is not first a perception followed by a movement, the perception and the movement form a system that is modified as a whole. (PhP, 113)

The intention is thus not externally associated with the movement, but ”it is immanent in the movement, it animates it and guides it along at each moment” (Ibid.). Thus, neither the intention nor the movement can be articulated in isolation without being deprived of the concrete significance of the motor project of which they both take part. The situation has no need of being analyzed into its constitutive parts in order to be seized and understood by the lived body. Rather, it obliges us to consider motor intentionality as an expression of our own body’s immediate understanding of the things we perceive on the one hand, as well as of its own situation in the world on the other. Thus, if previously we were led with the notion of an operative intentionality towards the pre-thetic structures of intentional life, so presently the notion of motor intentionality draws our attention to the fact that these structures are not pre-given in any particular situation, but rather emerge and change in tandem with what presents itself in the unfolding of the situation. Whilst being a power of projecting around itself a situation or an *Umwelt* in which things figure primarily as the poles of our actions, the body is simultaneously an openness or a sensitivity towards the world, a capacity for being solicited by that which presents itself in the unfolding of this world. Obviously, merely qualifying the body as a form, or as a ”whole anterior to its parts,” cannot account for this dynamic interplay of projection and solicitation disclosed in motor intentionality. As a consequence, Merleau-Ponty must seek a more radical sense of the form of the body that would include also a motor dimension of its intentionality. It is for this reason that he turns to the notion of the ”corporeal schema,” a concept that allows us finally to grasp an *existential* meaning of the body, disclosing beneath the experience of the body an originary experience of the body in the world.

The Corporeal Schema.

The body, we have established above, is not a self-enclosed entity but must rather be understood in relation to a given situation. Its spatiality is not *positional*, we might say, but *situational*. It manifests a spatiality of form: "If my body can ultimately be a 'form,' and if there can be, in front of it, privileged figures against indifferent backgrounds, this is insofar as my body is polarized by its tasks, insofar as it exists toward them" (PhP, 103). The particular form of embodied being-in-the-world signified by this existence towards... is elaborated by Merleau-Ponty using the concept of the "corporeal schema" (*schéma corporel*), a term borrowed from the tradition of neuropsychiatry.⁴⁷ In this tradition, what the notion of the corporeal schema was originally intended to express was that the biological-behavioural norms of the human body, by virtue of its plasticity, could vary indefinitely in accordance with the fluctuation of its environment. Merleau-Ponty, however, gives it a distinctly phenomenological significance. As he explains:

[T]he normal subject has his body not only as a system of current positions, but also, and consequently, as an open system of an infinity of equivalent positions in different orientations. What we called the "corporeal schema" is precisely this system of equivalences, this immediately given invariant by which different motor tasks are instantly transposable. This is to say that the corporeal schema is not only an experience of my body, but rather an experience of my body in the world (PhP, 142).⁴⁸

It is thus the schema of the body that ultimately assures, at each moment, the internal and immanent unfolding of an intention within our movements without the intervention of reflection. Correlatively, it is what allows us to immediately perceive a meaning within a series of movements independently of any interpretation that we might give it. What this means is that the body gains, or better *exists* its unity in relation to the things that it perceives and acts upon in an environment where things figure primarily, not as the noematic poles of a conscious intending, but as the manipulanda of our sensorimotor projects. Its unity, far from that of any generic psychophysical thing, is the articulation of a primordial unity with the world, body and world forming an integrated whole sustained by the tasks engaged with by the former. In this sense, the schema of the body is a form, but a form which is strangely *inapparent*. It is a form that appears only in not appearing to itself, that is present only in

⁴⁷ Notably from the works of neurologist Henry Head (*Studies in Neurology, vol. II*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920) and psychiatrist Paul Schilder (*The Image and Appearance of the Human Body: Studies in the Constructive Energies of the Psyche*, London: Routledge, 1999), though it should be noted that at the time of his writing *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty's knowledge of the latter is mostly second-hand through the works of Jean Lhermitte (*L'image de notre corps*, Paris: Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1939).

⁴⁸ Translation modified.

letting something else come to the fore. It is the imperceived background of corporeality against which phenomena sketch themselves out in perception. It is to this "letting appear" in the non-, or in-appearing of the corporeal schema that we shall now turn, as it is the mark of a fundamental phenomenon in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of form, namely "expression."

"The corporeal schema is not only an experience of my body, but rather an experience of my body in the world." What does this mean? In order to answer, let us take a look at the following example. In the acquisition of a skill or a habit – such as learning to ride a bicycle or learning to play a musical instrument – it is not simply a matter of discovering, in an act of reflection, an ideal formula of action which may then be repeated on numerically different occasions. In fact, the act of reflecting upon habitually performed activities is more often than not detrimental to the performance, the latter operating smoothly only to the degree that we cease to *think* about it and instead let ourselves be *seized* by its movement. Instead, we may describe the acquisition of a skill as a process of familiarization starting initially from an unfamiliar situation and then gradually adjusting the internal organization of the body in order to accommodate its structure to a new, eventually familiar situation. The learning process, we might say, is systematic or structural, and not accumulative. Habit or skill acquisition is thus neither a form of reflective knowledge nor a function of simple mnemonic association: "It is a question of knowledge in our hands, which is only given through a bodily effort" in the experience of "the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization" (PhP, 145-46). Thus, "habit resides neither in thought nor in the objective body, but rather in the body as the mediator of a world" (PhP, 146). In this sense, the analysis of habit allows Merleau-Ponty to situate the being of the corporeal schema at the very place where body and world meet and interlock.

However, and more importantly, the analysis of habit (or skill acquisition) discloses also a certain power at the heart of the schema, one extending beyond the confines of the natural body. "Habit," he writes, "expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments" (PhP, 145). Whereas some habits are attainable within the limits set by the natural means of the body, others can only be reached by constructing an instrument. In such cases, "the body projects a cultural world around itself," lending "the momentary movements of freedom" a "renewable action and independent existence." "Habit," Merleau-Ponty concludes, is ultimately "but a mode of this fundamental power" (PhP, 148).

Now, one might be led to conclude by this description, as indeed some commentators have, that the "fundamental power" of the body and its "projection" are in fact but a reformulation of the act-intentionality of meaning-bestowal that the analysis of the body was supposed to reject.⁴⁹ Behind any objectivating act of intending, there would be thus be a parallel motor act, subtending the former while nevertheless being predestined for a subsequent eidetic clarification. Now, while it is true that in *Phenomenology* Merleau-Ponty tends to primarily emphasize the activity of the subject, this activity must not be understood in isolation as some actualization of an ideally explicable meaning. Indeed, it is in his descriptions of habit that we find the strongest refutation of this interpretation. Take for instance the following description of an experienced organist performing a musical score:

During the rehearsal – just as during the performance – the stops, the pedals, and the keyboards are only presented to him as powers of such and such an emotional or musical value, and their position as those places through which this value appears in the world. Between the musical essence of the piece such as it is indicated in the score and the music that actually resonates around the organ, such a direct relationship is established that the body of the organist and the instrument are nothing other than the place of passage of this relation. From then on, the music exists for itself, and everything else exists through it. There is no place here for a "memory" of the location of the stops, and the organist does not play within objective space. In fact, his rehearsal gestures are gestures of consecration: they put forth affective vectors, they discover emotional sources, and they create an expressive space, just as the gestures of the augur define the templum. (PhP, 146-47)

In addition to the above-mentioned passage, Merleau-Ponty cites (in a footnote) Proust's description in *In Search of Lost Time* of the *petite phrase* in Vinteuil's sonata: "As though the musicians were not nearly so much playing the little phrase as performing the rites on which it insisted before it would consent to appear." "Its cries were so sudden that the little violinist

⁴⁹ To give just one example, Dimitris Apostolopoulos writes that in the perspective of *Phenomenology*, "meaning in objects is only disclosed given our active engagement with the object, enabled by structures that subjects have within themselves," and he cites the following example in support of his claim: "Thus, a thing is not actually given in perception, it is inwardly taken up by us, reconstituted and lived by us insofar as it is linked to a world whose fundamental structures we carry with ourselves and of which this thing is just one of several possible concretions" (PhP, 341). "Intentionality, Constitution and Merleau-Ponty's Concept of 'The Flesh'," in *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2016, p. 681. However, there is a sleight of hand involved here. As Merleau-Ponty clearly states, we carry the structures of meaning not "within" ourselves, but "with" us. The concept of the corporeal schema is intended precisely to take seriously the claim that meaning is experienced as being *of* the world, as opposed to being merely the interior schematics for an exterior construction of the world.

must snatch up his bow and race to catch them as they came.”⁵⁰ In a sense, the musician does not so much bring into being the piece itself, as if by some actualization of its musical “idea,” as lend it a sensible place to descend into the world. Therefore, we would be just as mistaken in claiming that the essence of the piece is to be found in the score as we would be in suggesting that the performance of the piece is the musical presentation of its essence. In reality, “[w]hat we call an ‘idea’ is necessarily linked to an act of expression and owes its appearance of autonomy to this act” (PhP, 410). This is to say that the meaning of the musical piece is inseparable from and immanent to the movement of its performance. Between the two no external association is possible. The musical “idea” that is expressed is thus none other than the intentional movement which animates it and guides it along at each moment; an intentionality that establishes such a direct relation between the notation and its sensible manifestation that the music seems to take on a life on its own. Indeed, it comes to be perceived as anterior to the very movement that brings it about, thereby presenting us with a paradoxical form of temporality that resists linear analysis. It leads an existence “in a time,” as it were, “more secret than natural time” (Ibid.).

Furthermore, the quasi-sacred dimension upon which Merleau-Ponty insists in invoking terms such as “consecration” and the performance of “rites” is the following: The form of the body – being at once a part of the world and a perspective on the world, the place of passage where body becomes world and world becomes body – is an *expressive space*, a place where existence and essence are “knotted” together (PhP, 148) in one sole “movement of expression (PhP, 147). In establishing this expressive space the body withdraws from the appearing (which, as we have seen, is essential for the functioning of the schema) and in so doing lets the world express *itself* in a dimension of relative autonomy. Otherwise put, we would like to suggest that in the movement of expression the body becomes the place of passage where the world passes into itself and begins to exist *for* itself in its relative autonomy. This is not to say that the body in its withdrawing is completely effaced from this movement. Rather, the withdrawnness signifies its way of being eminently *present* to the expressive relation, not in the sense of being apprehensible before the attention of a reflective gaze, nor in the sense of simply being passively presented alongside that which presents itself, but rather in the form of an invisible background of presence. It is “the always implied

⁵⁰ Marcel Proust. *In Search of Lost Time, vol. 1, Swann’s Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised D. J. Enright, New York: Modern Library, 1998, pp. 494; 500 (cited in PhP, 147 n. 117).

third term of the figure-background structure” (PhP, 103), a structure which signifies the world’s ordinary way of manifesting itself.

By the mediation of the schema, the momentary movements of the body acquire an enduring existence as they are caught up in one sole motor project. From within this project they become indicative of an intention, coming to expression as a particular meaning. Yet this meaning paradoxically comes to be perceived, in the expressed figure of its ideality, as having antedated the intention of which it is supposedly the fulfillment. The original intention thus finds itself modified by the figure of its expression and, as a consequence, is obliged to accommodate its subsequent movements accordingly. The whole difficulty lies in conceiving of the tension in the relation between intention and expression without reinstating a dialectic that would presumptively resolve it in a non-contradictory form or in an ulterior identity.

We will describe this process in greater detail in the second part of our investigation. Presently, however, we would like to conclude by suggesting that it is the merit of the notion of the corporeal schema to make us see how this ”paradox of expression” unfolds in the very tension of projection and solicitation that we find in motor intentionality and which constitutes the existential unity of the body. Nonetheless, in defining the schema as a ”system of equivalences,” assuring the transposition and iterability of different motor projects, in other words, as a principle of identity; do we not risk affirming an indifference vis-à-vis the space in which it is configured? This would amount to cutting the body off from its support, which is exactly the transcendence of the world and the condition of its openness. The question remains, moreover, how it can be that we are intentionally directed towards a meaning that only appears across the movement of its own expression. In other words, what is the sense of an ideality whose meaning is experienced as ”already there,” yet that ”exists” only in so far as it comes to expression? In order that we may answer this question it is necessary to describe in greater detail the intentional relation at stake in expression. To end the first part of our investigation we shall therefore focus our attention on Merleau-Ponty’s description of ”motivation,” as it sheds light on some essential aspects of expression.

Motivation: Beyond Causality and Rationality

It is clear that, according to Merleau-Ponty, the intentional relation between perceiving and the perceived world must be understood at a structural or even existential level, one which is (1): irreducible to the strictly substantial reality of the purely physical or the purely mental (implied, in one form or another, by empiricism and intellectualism); and (2): one that precedes and even subtends the conceptual processes involved in the apprehension of essences. In turning to the notion of the corporeal schema, he discovers a pre-reflective manner of relating oneself to the world in which the latter is not subjected to a transcendental-constitutive framework, but understood instead as the pre-objective milieu of our being-in-the-world. As the variable pole towards which the schema of the body projects itself, the world is at once that which is encompassed by and that which encompasses the perceiving body. The embodied subject passes into the world that it brings into appearance, moving through the very space that it constitutes by its movement. As a motor subject it is situated in the world and engaged with it as the ultimate horizon of all that is brought into appearance, as that which simultaneously resists its motor projects and invites further exploration. In this sense, the perceiving subject comes to, and answers to the call of the very thing that it purportedly brings into appearance. This paradoxical logic emanating from the relation between moving and appearing is what lies at the heart of expression.

Now, in order to better describe the intentional relation at stake in the phenomenon of expression, Merleau-Ponty turns to the phenomenological notion of "motivation." This is a concept that was introduced into phenomenology by Husserl and later on further developed by Edith Stein. Because it is the latter to whom Merleau-Ponty explicitly refers, it is her definition of motivation that we shall first briefly recount.⁵¹

For Stein, motivation designates the internal relation of grounding (*Fundierung*) between intentional acts or experiences, a "basic lawfulness of mental living":

Motivation, in our general sense, is *the* connection that acts get into with one another: not a mere blending like that of simultaneously or sequentially ebbing phases of experiences, or the associative

⁵¹ For Husserl's concept of motivation, cf. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book. General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, (trans.) Fred Kersten, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983 pp. 106-07; 107 n. 3; *Ideas II*, §56, pp. 231-248.

tying together of experiences, but an *emerging* of the one *out of* the other, a self fulfilling or being fulfilled of the one *on the basis of* the other *for the sake of* the other.⁵²

A motive, generally speaking, is something that enables a certain mode of behavior in establishing a connection of sense with any number of motivata. It presents for the subject a range of possibilities of courses of action – none of which are necessary (as would have been the case in "external" or mechanical causality), nor for that matter accidental. A sense content, according to Stein, only becomes a motive if it is inserted into a particular context or ensemble of meaning – in other words, into the course of experiences of a particular subject, which is why a certain sense content may function differently as a motive within different contexts or for different individuals. Motivation must thus not be taken to be an account of causality. Nor does it designate a rational connection. Hearing a noise for instance, it *understandable* that it attracts my attention, Stein claims, though on the other hand this attraction is neither *reasonable* nor *unreasonable*. Thus, we are dealing here with a connection of motivational, not rational grounding (that is, motives must not *require* their motivata but merely *permit* them).⁵³ When Stein describes motivata as emerging on the basis of, or for the sake of the motive she means that the content of the motive is only brought to givenness because the act of motivation has been carried out. This means that motives operate in virtue of their *meaning* in relation to a certain lived situation that must be taken as a *whole*. Thus, the noise may motivate me to act in a certain way because of the significance which it holds out to me. Of course, this would not be possible if the noise did not in some way set in motion a certain vibration of my eardrums. But it is not for the sake of the vibration in my eardrums that I am motivated; it is for the sake of the particular significance that the noise carries for me, the way it *resounds*, as it were, with my entire existence.

From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, however, motivation describes the Gestaltic structure of perception, merging the ambiguous presence of the motive with the implicit presence of the phenomenal background. As an example, Merleau-Ponty mentions the phenomenon of lighting:

First, let us examine the strange mode of appearance of light or colors that we call lighting. What is strange here? What happens in the moment when a certain patch of light is taken as lighting, rather than counting for itself? It took centuries of painting before the reflections upon the eye were seen, without

⁵² Edith Stein. *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, trans. Mary Catherine Baseheart & Marianne Sawicki, Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000, p. 65.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

which the painting remains lifeless and blind, as in the paintings by primitive peoples. The reflection is not seen for itself, since it was unable to go unnoticed for so long, and yet it has its function in perception, since its mere absence is enough to remove the life and the expression from objects and from faces. The reflection is only seen out of the corner of the eye. It is not presented as an aim of our perception, it is the auxiliary or the mediator of our perception. It is not itself seen, but makes the rest be seen (PhP, 322-23).

Lighting, as a motive, helps us understand the multifaceted meaning of the phenomenal background. The latter is not necessarily something surrounding the object in the enveloping sense. The background can also be *interior* to the perceived (like a "glimmer" of the eye) because, as a structuration of appearing, it is not an *objective* feature of the perceived but a *phenomenal* feature. It pertains not to the thing, but to the field of appearing. It is not *light* but *lighting*. It is, we could say, "atmospheric" in that it indicates a *manner* of appearing rather than a simple appearance. The reflection of light which animates the eye is part of what is seen, but it is not seen *per se*. As Mark A. Wrathall points out, the fact that this reflection could have remained unnoticed throughout so many years of attempts to faithfully capture what we *do see*, provides us with ample evidence that what is seen is not necessarily available to thought, and thus not ground for an inference or a rational justification.⁵⁴ Hence, the phenomenon of lighting helps us understand how we are as much motivated by the directly given as we are by that which is only given across a certain absence. We always see more than we think we see.

But motivation indicates not only the spatial constitution of the field. It also draws our attention to the meaning of its temporal constitution as being in principle inseparable from the meaning disclosed in its temporal development. What this means is that one phenomenon sets in motion ("motivates") another, not by its own intrinsic meaning, nor as a result of any thetic meaning-bestowal, but as an *enactment* of sense, as a meaning appearing only *across* the movement of phenomenalization in the course of its temporal unfolding.

One phenomenon triggers another, not through some objective causality, such as the one linking together the events of nature, but rather through the sense it offers – there is a sort of operative reason, or a *raison d'être* that orients the flow of phenomena without being explicitly posited in any of them. [...] To the extent that the motivated phenomenon is brought about, its internal relation with the motivating phenomenon appears, and rather than merely succeeding it, the motivated phenomenon

⁵⁴ Mark A. Wrathall. "Motives, Reasons, and Causes," in (ed.) Taylor Carman, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 117.

makes the motivating one explicit and clarifies it, such that the motivated seems to have preexisted its own motive. (PhP, 51)

Motivation thus resists the linear logic that governs objective thought. The motivated phenomenon can only *retroactively* indicate the motivating phenomenon, absorbing the facticity of its origin in its expressed ideality.⁵⁵ The motive has always already come to pass and can therefore never be made present in the innocence of its own origin. This absence is in a way the ground of its presence. Since it can only appear in the order of sense which it has instituted, it is only obliquely present, validating our experience by a strange logic that itself can never be made explicit. The relation between motive and motivated, instead of being posited beforehand, thus only comes into being *with* the movement of phenomenalization, leading us to the underlying significance of the paradox of expression.

The paradox stems from the fact that in the phenomenon of motivation we are confronted with contradictory demands – it being impossible that something should simultaneously be a beginning and an end, a past and a future – and that these demands are impossible to reconcile under a more elevated concept or determination. Rather, in the phenomenon of motivation we are dealing with what Bernhard Waldenfels calls an *expressive event*:

If something preceded it, like a prior phase or a fundamental strata [sic] of experience, the event of expression would again be reduced to something that it is not. The paradox of expression means that the event of expression precedes itself, that it is younger and older than itself. Present and past do not follow one another but are entangled within one another.⁵⁶

The whole difficulty then lies in conceiving of the event of expression without postulating a reason or a cause that would precede and subtend it. And this is precisely why we cannot conceive of it according to the standards set up by objective thinking. Because as subjects of thought or of understanding we are always confronted with the world such as it is layed out, before our hands and before our eyes, in its fully constituted meaning. On the other hand, if we are to seize the world, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, "in its nascent state" then we must try and envisage it in the very movement of its appearing. This entails an effort to leave

⁵⁵ The phenomenon of motivation thereby excludes both idealism and realism: "Idealism, by making the exterior immanent in me, and realism, by subjecting me to causal action, both falsify the relations of motivation that exist between the exterior and the interior and render this relation incomprehensible" (PhP, 381).

⁵⁶ Bernhard Waldenfels. "The Paradox of Expression," in Evans, Fred & Lawlor, Leonard (eds.). *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 96.

the paradox of expression be, instead of attempting to resolve it by means of any external criterion. Only thus may thought situate itself within the very event of expression and disclose thereby a new meaning of the natural world; one in which it is originally given in the form of an ambiguous presence, a presence that fundamentally involves also a dimension of absence that can only partially or indirectly be brought to light. The notion of motivation constitutes a preliminary attempt to make evident the characteristic logic of a delayed or retroactive "effect" (a logic of *Nachträglichkeit, d'après coup*) that from the perspective of intentionality signals the advent of the expressive event. Nevertheless, being primarily employed with the intent of demonstrating the descriptive inadequacy of realist-rationalist models, the notion of motivation becomes merely indicative of the philosophical problem with which we are presently grappling, namely: how do we render a positive account of form that would include also the phenomenal reality of expression?

From a phenomenological standpoint, we claim, this problem cannot be resolved as long as one has not answered the underlying question that is its first occasion and which asks: *what is the meaning of the being of form?* This is a question that, in the end, is not answered in the early works of the philosopher. The reason for this shortcoming is the following: In Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of perception there is discernable a certain ontological prejudice stemming from a tendency to equate perceptual meaning with phenomenal presence. If, as Gestalt psychology teaches us, the figure-ground configuration constitutes an irreducible structure of the world's manifestation, then the meaning of what appears in this configuration can only be sustained in its unity by the mediation of the lived body. However, in the perspective of *Phenomenology*, the body is primarily understood in the sense of being the support of the appearing, ensuring the identity of the series of appearances and the appearing thing across the unity of a sensorimotor project. In a sense, the problem stems from the very identification of the corporeal schema as a "system of equivalences." This definition leaves us with the impression that the body would exclusively be directed towards the given aspects of the world, ensuring the transposability of various motor tasks on the basis of a preliminary identity. Form would therefore to acquire the meaning of that which has already appeared based on the sensorimotor value it holds out to the structure of the body. Yet in some of the descriptions the lived body carries also a more radical sense of being an openness towards the non-given aspects of the world. The body exists its unity with the world in being always at grips with a certain absence, in remaining always open to a dimension of alterity in the perceived, a negativity that is implied in the Gestaltic movement of differentiation

between the figure and the ground. Differently put, the body must be understood as an openness towards transcendence, towards a sensible meaning that only gives itself at a distance, indeed *as* its own distance, if we are to understand the unique sense of its mediation otherwise than as analogous to the presence of a transcendental consciousness. Now, it is this indecisiveness vis-à-vis the being of form, and by extension the form of the body, that prevents Merleau-Ponty from drawing the necessary conclusions from the fact that the Gestalt is *not the thing* but the very *event of its appearing*.

We have tried in this first part of our investigation to show how the philosophical question of form can only be distinguished from its psychological counterpart on the basis of its first posing the preliminary question regarding the being of form. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty approaches this question through the lens of phenomenology, showing how the manifestation of form necessarily takes on an intentional structure. Nevertheless, its manifestation is not subordinated to the structure of this intentionality. Rather, it confronts us with a certain autonomy of the appearing that, in a way, remains transcendent in relation to our perceptual experience of it. It is this "autochthonous" meaning of the appearing, seemingly grounded in the structure of the body yet experienced as belonging to the world, that the phenomenon of expression is intended to describe. In expression, we discover a new meaning of the natural world, one which cannot be explained using the categories of objective thought. As we shall see, it is with the aid of this concept that Merleau-Ponty will return to the question of the being of form in order to ask its sense anew. However, as we shall argue, it is only years later in his first course held at the Collège de France that Merleau-Ponty is able to approach this question in a manner that surmounts the conceptual shortcomings of his earlier phase. It is therefore on a reading of the notes accompanying this course and its re-evaluation of the concept of form that we shall presently focus our attention.

Part II.

The Radicalization of Form: Collège de France (1953).

The overarching aim of *Phenomenology* is for Merleau-Ponty to undertake a radical description of the perceived world and its correlate, the perceiving subject. He shows that any description of the former necessarily directs us towards an investigation of the embodied

being of the latter without which something like a world and a transcendence would not be possible. Years later, however, by the time of the preparation of the manuscript which posthumously has been named *The Visible and the Invisible*, he expresses some dissatisfaction with the 1945 work, as shown in the following working notes: "The problems posed in [*Phenomenology of Perception*] are insoluble because I start there from the 'consciousness'-'object' distinction" (VI, 200), "Results of Ph.P.—Necessity of bringing them to ontological explicitation" (VI, 182). In fact, a similar sentiment is heralded already in his first course held at the Collège de France in 1953 entitled *The Sensible World and the World of Expression*:

The categories that must be abandoned in their classical sense are: perception (the percept being an isolated object, position), consciousness (as a centrifugal power of *Sinngebung*, consciousness finding only that which it puts into the things), synthesis (supposing elements to reunite, the problem of the unity of *Erlebnisse*), matter and form of knowledge.⁵⁷ (MSME, 45-46)

According to Barbaras these categories govern, to a greater or lesser extent, the interpretations of *Phenomenology* because in this work Merleau-Ponty is still uncritically relying on a certain notion of consciousness:

At the time of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty considered being-in-the-world as an embodied consciousness: the perceiving subject is immediately interpreted as a consciousness and therefore, the body is finally understood as the "mediator of the world" for this consciousness. The relevant opposition is between a reflective, or intellectual consciousness, and an embodied one. [...] It appears that the fact of interpreting being-in-the-world and, hence, perception, as the activity of an embodied consciousness, amounts to missing the openness upon the world, the givenness (*donation*) of a transcendence that characterizes perceptual life.⁵⁸

Similarly, Stefan Kristensen argues that Merleau-Ponty, in presumptively positing the lived body as the origin of all signification, is merely reiterating the transcendental gesture of positing meaning as the correlate of a subjective activity:

When [Merleau-Ponty] writes that 'the body is our general means of having a word,' he posits, following the example of Husserl in *Ideen*, a priority of the noetic over the noematic, that is, a priority of the act vis-à-vis the intentional object. Now, this leads him to consider the body as a consciousness which, situated in the world, nevertheless keeps, so to speak, a foot outside of it and that can decide

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty. *Le Monde Sensible et le Monde de l'Expression: Cours au Collège de France, Notes 1953*, Genève: Métis Presses, 2011, pp. 45f. Hereafter "MSME."

⁵⁸ Barbaras. "Perception and Movement: The End of the Metaphysical Approach," in Evans & Lawlor, 2000, p. 77.

without appeal to confer a sense to that which it perceives. The origin of sense is thus explicated with concepts coming from dualist modes of thought.⁵⁹

It seems then, that without properly redefining the meaning of the perceiving being, the meaning of perception runs the risk of being interpreted according to dualist schemata (the splitting of the in-itself and the for-itself, existence and essence, matter and form) and, as a consequence, of misunderstanding the true meaning of transcendence. In other words, subjectivity must be re-thought not as the support of the world in its appearing (not as the mediator between a world and a consciousness), but as an openness towards an originary transcendence. Not as an absolute ubiquity in front of the world, but as a negativity that only seizes the world across a distance – an ontological distance that would be the originary mode of appearing of the world in so far as its sensible presence only communicates itself across a certain absence.

We have proposed an interpretation according to which the event of expression for Merleau-Ponty signifies the movement whereby the world comes to exist for itself *qua* world. If the originary form of being of the world lies in the perceived and if it is an irreducible necessity of perception to be situated in the world through a perceiving body, then this movement only comes to pass through the mediation of the corporeal schema. The schema, far from being a positive ontic thing, is a distributor of functions that subtends the world's appearing by its own inappearing. It is "an expressive space" in which the body exists its unity with the world by being simultaneously at grips with a dimension of absence in the perceived. Now, this dimension of absence or negativity is thematized in a singular manner in the 1953-course, drawing, among other things, on examples borrowed from Gestalt psychology and cinema. Central to these examples are the different ways that they thematize and deploy the phenomenon of movement – a phenomenon which in Merleau-Ponty's interpretation comes to acquire a decisively ontological significance. Not only does he show how movement can be taken to be a figural property of the phenomenal field, he also demonstrates that the field itself is always subject to a certain movement of phenomenalization. As a phenomenon, movement does not so much unfold in an already constituted time as become constitutive of our experience of time. It actively seizes time and deploys it around itself in the wake of its own appearing. Its spatio-temporal constitution is thus inseparable from its manifestation, and its signification becomes one with its appearing.

⁵⁹ Stefan Kristensen. "Maurice Merleau-Ponty, une esthétique du mouvement," in *Archives de Philosophie*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2006, p. 124

Differently put, there is a reciprocal relation of "grounding" (*Fundierung*) between movement and form in which neither assumes priority over the other, summarized by Merleau-Ponty in the brief formula: "movement is the becoming of a figure." Being a structuration of time and space, this becoming, we will argue, must ultimately be taken to signify a certain rhythm or tempo stemming from the appearing of the sensible world itself.

The World of Expression

The goal of the 1953-course is twofold. First, to "deepen the analysis of the perceived world in showing that it already supposes an expressive function." Second, to "prepare the analysis of this function by which the perceived world is sublimated, [...] a concrete theory of spirit." (MSME, 45). In other words, a phenomenological reduction of the perceived world is to be carried out, disclosing thereby an underlying sense of the natural (or sensible) world in which it comes to be experienced as already expressive. Here, as in the previous works, Merleau-Ponty draws heavily on the fields of Gestalt psychology and neuropsychiatry in order to advance his theses. However, the real innovation in 1953 lies in the re-elaboration of the *Gestalt*, following the advent of structuralism in the human sciences, in terms of "diacritical structure." Conceptually, the encounter between these two notions is nothing astounding in itself – as we have seen, in the 30's and 40's Merleau-Ponty frequently used the notion "structure," albeit in a sense which was more or less appropriated from the field of psychology. Under the influence of Saussure, however, he comes to emphasize the diacritical nature of the perceptual field by identifying its structuring element with a certain absence, with a kind of operative difference supplanting an expressive function into the perceived world itself. As he will later put it:

Overused today, the term ["structure"] had a precise meaning to begin with. Psychologists used it to designate the configurations of the perceptual field, those wholes articulated by certain lines of force and giving every phenomenon its local value. In linguistics, too, structure is a concrete, incarnate system. When Saussure used to say that linguistic signs are diacritical – that they function only through their differences, through a certain spread between themselves and other signs and not, to begin with, by evoking a positive signification – he was making us see the unity which lies beneath a language's

explicit signification, a systematization which is achieved in a language before its conceptual principle is known.⁶⁰

This systematization before conceptualization is the characteristics not only of language, but of perception in general. In *The Sensible World* this identification of perception and language assumes a critical importance. By emphasizing the diacritical structure of the phenomenal field, Merleau-Ponty is trying to think our experience of the world without subordinating it to an explicit logic or to an idealization. As he phrases it in one note: "The sensorial fields are this: diacritical systems with use-values, systems of equivalences and of characteristic substitution, that no more rest on an explicit logic than the employment of language rests upon a scientific knowledge of language" (MSME, 118). Through this rapprochement of language and perception, then, Merleau-Ponty seeks in greater detail to describe the expressive function of the world without thereby renouncing the intentional threads that bind it to the lived body.

By this token, the notion of expression finds itself re-defined in *The Sensible World*: "With expression or expressiveness," Merleau-Ponty writes, "we understand here the property of a phenomenon to reveal, by its internal organization, another that is not, or has never been, given – in this sense the tool, the work expresses the person" (MSME, 48). A phenomenon is thus not the sensible appearance of an object that is present, but a certain circumscribed absence – a showing forth of what is not strictly speaking "there" (except in an ambiguous and indeterminate manner). Furthermore, a phenomenon reveals another phenomenon not by its own positive signification (as being the appearance of "this" or "that" thing) but by its internal organization, that is its function in the phenomenal field or its difference vis-à-vis the other phenomena. Stefan Kristensen has offered a helpful clarification of this definition: "By the notion of expression, Merleau-Ponty names the most originary phenomenon of intentional life, the fact that the meaning of the given always exceeds the given itself, namely that each phenomenon is experienced as referring to another."⁶¹ How then, in this indefinite play of phenomenal differences, do we gain access to the thing if it is only in its appearing that the thing presents itself? Here the comparison with language is once more instructive:

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty. "From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss," in *Signs*, p. 117.

⁶¹ Art. cit., p. 125.

I am present to the thing in the sense that each of its perspectives is for me but an emission of... the thing itself [...], that by them I reach the thing to which I am anchored. And the thing is distant in the sense that it only delivers these messages on the condition of remaining horizon, ground, inaccessible, [a] style indicated by the convergence of the *Erscheinungen*. The thing [is] accessible in the perspectives (diacritical signs) like the signification in the words. (MSME, 181)

The perceived thing is only accessible, then, on the condition of being given across a certain sensible distance; a distance, moreover, that is irreducible and therefore indicative of an essential transcendence of the perceived. The phenomenon must be given at a distance from itself, which is to say that it must be given in excess of itself – it must be given with an accompanying *horizon*. A horizon, moreover, that may only be explored by a subject capable of movement since, as we have showed in the first part of our investigation, it is only an essentially mobile subject that is capable of distinguishing between the appearance and the "something" of which the appearance is an appearing. Or, better, who is capable of being solicited by an appearance as a call for further exploration (or any other sensorimotor response) in order that the thing may come into a more developed appearing.

Now, if the perceived only announces itself, as it were, across certain sensible "messages," then perception might be qualified as a properly hermeneutical activity. Not, however, in the sense of offering us discrete elements of meaning (comparable to linguistic contents), but as being indicative of a "style" of appearing, a meaning obliquely present like a theme that only presents itself across its own variations. The problem then arises: How can we grasp a meaning that is only given in the mode of its proper self-differentiation? How can we be present to the thing if it remains irreducibly transcendent in relation to the sensible appearances by which it presents itself? These are the questions that guide Merleau-Ponty's interest for the phenomenon of movement in *The Sensible World*. As we shall see, it is only by presupposing a certain expressive dimension originating in the sensible world itself that we can begin to answer them. In order to show this, Merleau-Ponty recounts a number of psychological experiments that demonstrate how there is present an expressive function in the phenomenon of movement. In what follows, we will briefly recount two such experiments, those of Max Wertheimer and Albert Michotte.

Movement as Expression: The Experiments of Max Wertheimer and Albert Michotte.

The crucial experiment conducted by Max Wertheimer, of which we have already made a brief mention, is the following: Using a so-called “tachistoscope” (an instrument capable of projecting a beam of light on a given surface and interrupting it at measured fractions of a second), he was able to flash figures of light at certain variable intervals and thereby present displacements of simple geometrical figures, such as lines or curves.⁶² What he found was that if the interval between the disappearing of one figure *a* and the appearing of another figure *b* was about 30 milliseconds or less, the figures would appear to be present at the same time to the perceiving subject. If the interval was 200 milliseconds or longer, the subject perceived two figures appearing and disappearing in clear succession. However, if the interval was at about 60 milliseconds, the subject would perceive *one figure*, rather than two simultaneous or two successive figures, *moving* from one position to another and then back again in what Wertheimer concluded was the phenomenon of “pure” movement, that is, an appearing of movement without a corresponding moving object.

Albert Michotte’s experiments on perceived causality and auto-locomotion were similarly intended to demonstrate how a phenomenon of movement may result from a certain configuration of the phenomenal field, without any “real” movement actually taking place. The results of these experiments were later published in *The Perception of Causality* (1946). In the experiment on perceived causality, a projected object (A) is shown on a screen as moving toward another stationary object (B) until they are adjacent to each other, at which point object (B) takes off and starts moving along the same projected path. When a perceiving subject is presented with this configuration, the series is perceived not as a succession of moments, but as a succession of *events*. A *collision* is perceived in which A is the cause of B’s motion. In the experiment auto-locomotion one sole object is projected on the screen in the form of a variously protracting and retracting rectangle. Depending on how the elongation of the figure is modulated at different temporal intervals, the subject presented with this configuration will spontaneously exclaim that he or she is witnessing a caterpillar or a worm in movement (“*Mais, c’est une chenille!*”, “*C’est un ver de terre!*”). In short, the figure will be perceived as moving on its own accord, as being animated by a sort of interior movement, so that what is being perceived is a phenomenon of auto-locomotion.⁶³

⁶² Wertheimer, “Experimental Studies on Seeing Motion,” pp. 13-65.

⁶³ Albert Michotte. *La perception de la causalité*, Paris: Vrin, 1946, pp. 39-76; 176-77.

Now, what the experiments of Wertheimer and Michotte teach us, Merleau-Ponty explains, is that movement, far from being a secondary quality of a determinate thing, stands in a profoundly cohesive relationship with the being of the perceived. In Michotte's experiment on the perception of causality there is a kind of encroaching (*empiétement*) of the end of the process bearing upon its beginning in which the beginning retroactively takes on the character of being a preparation for the "launching." Correlatively, there is also an encroaching of the beginning upon that which follows, so that the end of the process is perceived as a natural consequence of the beginning. There is thus a reciprocity between the movement of the figure, we might say, and the figural character of the movement. At the moment of contact between the colliding figures, an *expressive event* takes place, allowing us to see the sequence of movements as a dynamic whole, an interaction of forces, rather than a number of independent series. Thus, the figurative character of the projected movement arises from the phenomenal field itself as a certain modulation of its structure. Perceptual sense, far from preceding, as an abstract "form," the concrete fact of its apprehension, is therefore immanent to the appearing as such. Seen from this perspective it makes no sense to ask if the movement stems from the figural, or conversely if the figural must be derived from the movement. They are, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, in a reciprocal relation of grounding: "Therefore movement = in a relation of *Fundierung* with expression: certainly it carries it, it makes it exist, but it is interiorly animated by it, the local displacement is only seen across a network of signs of which the meaning of ultra-spatial (MSME, 169), just as "in the comprehension of a sentence the end reacts upon the beginning, the meaning goes from the whole to the parts, but finally this whole is suggested by the parts" (MSME, 104). This leads Merleau-Ponty to conclude that "the apprehension of meaning and the apprehension of movement are the same thing" (Ibid.). Movement, being a figural property, can thus be apprehended in its phenomenal form as the internal articulation of a figure-ground structure.

But the meaning of the appearing is not exhausted in its immediate perceptual apprehension. As we have seen, by the notion of expression Merleau-Ponty wants to draw attention to the fact that the meaning of each given phenomenon always exceeds itself in referring to another. The meaning of the appearing is given in excess of itself in referring to a totality or a form whose organizing principle is nowhere present as such to the perceiving subject. Instead, it presents itself only in an ambiguous manner, as a vague call to experience the world according to different lines of organization, a *way* of appearing (such as the "caterpillar" suddenly bursting forth within the simple projection of geometrical shapes in

movement). Perceptual sense is given as *immanent* only in referring to, or being guided by a totality the meaning of which is always *imminent*, a guiding principle "not so much possessed as it is practiced: perhaps one cannot define it, but one lives each aberrant fact as *deviation* in relation it" (MSME, 50). This circumscribed principle is the expression, Merleau-Ponty suggests, of a certain "power" inhabiting the figure, a certain style of the manifestation or a "physiognomy" (as he puts in in *Phenomenology*) that signifies our most originary way of access to the being of beings. Whence the short but decisive formula which states that "[t]he movement reveals being" (MSME, 106). Now, the being revealed in the phenomenon of movement, we claim, is none other than the sensible being of form. Taken in this sense, form signifies not so much the visible form of the appearing thing, but rather a certain power or intensity animating the phenomenal field from within and of which the appearing thing is always the more or less stabilized figure. It is, as the Gestalt theorists say, the dynamic underlying the appearing. In Wertheimer's experiment this dynamic manifests, at a certain intensity or tempo of the projection, a moving "something." In the experience of Michotte, movement is rhythmically configured around a more articulated tempo, varying across different intervalls and giving rise to still more complex figures. The ontological thesis of movement which states that "movement reveals being" as the "becoming of a figure" (MSME, 95) thus leads us towards a radicalized understanding of movement by which we may recognize in its expressive dimension an originary figure of transcendence, signifying the rhythmic presence of form in the manifestation of the world. Nonetheless, as we have seen, this presence never manifests itself directly but only indirectly in the figure of a certain circumscribed absence. The path to resolving this ambiguity cannot lie in returning to a theory of the perceiving subject understood in the genetic sense of a medium in which the passage between being and appearing would be effectuated. Instead, it must be founded upon the recognition of an expressive dimension of perception where non-sense, alterity and negativity are recognized, not as external limitations, but as dimensions *inherent to being* describing a perceptual meaning inseparable from the mode of its proper transcendence. This is why it becomes necessary for Merleau-Ponty to return once more to the subject of perception, namely the lived body such as it comes to light in the perspective of the corporeal schema.

The Corporeal Schema Redefined.

The necessity of incarnation, of having only *one* body, the body that one *is*, is the transcendental condition of our openness to the world and, by the same token, the mark of an irreducible transcendence of the world. This condition is not only accepted by Merleau-Ponty as a fact but also, and more importantly, as the indication of a philosophical problem. Being both sensing and sensible, the lived body can only be a perspective on the world in so far as it is a part of the world. Inversely, it can only be a part of the world if it is simultaneously withdrawn from the world as its non-objectifiable reverse side. What, then, is the mode of presence of this thing that only appears as its proper withdrawal? The body, according to Merleau-Ponty, must be understood as a reflective space, a space of non-coinciding in which it is only present to itself across a certain irreducible distance which may be experienced in the impossibility of seeing my seeing, of touching my touching – a distance which is the mode of existence of the lived body in so far as it is always sensing-sensed. As we have proposed above, it is across this distance that the body can become an "expressive space," the place where the world comes to itself *qua* world.

This line of thought receives renewed attention in *The Sensible World*. Just as in the 1945 work, Merleau-Ponty claims that it is only in reflecting upon the status of the lived body as an expressive space that we may disclose, beneath the immanent presence of a transcendental consciousness, an originary presence to the world that does not exclude its transcendence:

As a consciousness that perceives, I take part of the world and I occupy a point of view in it. I am close to the things but not in an entirely ideal presence: I am close to the thing because it takes possession of my body in order to make itself be perceived by it (the colour imposes on me a certain vital rhythm, the sound a certain adaptation of the organ, etc.), or even because my body, in the absence of the thing, is capable of giving it a quasi-presence. [...] Which is not without a distance, because the perceived thus only reveals itself by its vibration in me, it is always beyond (MSME, 49).

The proximity of the thing, far from proceeding from the immanence of consciousness, stems from the very transcendence of the world precisely because it is that which first grabs our attention. It takes possession of our perception as a *call* to be perceived because it is nowhere present "as such" but only indirectly in the figure of a rhythm to which the movements of the body must catch on. We might here recall the following description from *Phenomenology*:

The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not *set over against* it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon

myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue (PhP, 222).

"As a result," Merleau-Ponty concludes, "if I wanted to express perceptual experience with precision, I would have to say that *one (on)* perceives in me, and not that I (*Je*) perceive" (PhP, 223). Must we not recognize, in this anonymous atmosphere of perception, a kind of rationale proper to the sensible as such? Wouldn't we then be justified in asking with Bernhard Waldenfels: "If the lived body is at the same time seeing and visible, why shouldn't the things, as the annex of the lived body, inversely be visible and seeing?"⁶⁴ In essence, what Merleau-Ponty is describing is the functioning of what we, following Eliane Escoubas, might term an "inverse intentionality."⁶⁵ We would thus be in the presence of an intention of signification flowing from the very configuration of the perceived, the recognition of which would amount to a veritable "ontological rehabilitation of the sensible," to recall a famous phrase of the philosopher.⁶⁶ If we situate our description within this rehabilitation, then our interpretation of the expressive space of the body as the place of passage where the world comes to itself and begins to exist for itself *qua* world may come to light in greater detail

Now, "the blue of the sky" cannot be possessed as an object of our conscious intending precisely because then it would cease to be *of* the sky. No longer indicative of a world it would become *acosmic*, an "idea of blue" or a pure "blueness." The blue gives us the sky, we might say, only on the condition that we do not try to separate it from the ground of its appearing, which is none other than the world itself in the ordinary meaning of its transcendence. But inversely, the sky can only be given as blue if it passes through the body of the perceiving subject where it becomes "drawn together and unified" and "begins to exist for itself" in the concrete dimension of its blueness. In the expressive space of the body it reveals itself as a "vibration," as the imposition of a certain "vital rhythm." Only thus does its cosmic being acquire a sensible signification ("this limitless blue"). Far from being indicative of any ontic thing, then, the appearing acquires an ontological sense as the place where the world comes to itself *qua* world in the expressive space of the body. Correlatively, we see the

⁶⁴ Waldenfels. "Voir par images. Merleau-Ponty sur le tracé de la peinture," in Emmanuel Alloa & Adnen Jdey (eds.), *Du sensible à l'oeuvre: esthétiques de Merleau-Ponty*, Bruxelles: La lettre volée, 2012, p. 63.

⁶⁵ Eliane Escoubas. "La question de l'œuvre d'art: Merleau-Ponty et Heidegger," in Marc Richir & Étienne Tassin (eds.), *Merleau-Ponty: Phénoménologie et expériences*, Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2008, p. 128.

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty. "The Philosopher and His Shadow," in *Signs*, p. 167.

importance of the concept of rhythm, as it denotes a sensible figure of the appearing bringing into appearance the very movement of the appearing of beings. It is for this reason, we suggest, that the notion of rhythm resurfaces in various guises in the notes accompanying *The Sensible World*, although it is never thematized in its own right as an object of inquiry. Now, before offering our own interpretation of this concept based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of form, we propose to return to the notion of the corporeal schema as it signifies the very possibility of the body's entering into an expressive relation with the world.

In fact, Merleau-Ponty dedicates a large portion of the course to a re-examination of the corporeal schema.⁶⁷ In *Phenomenology* the schema was understood as a "system of equivalences" signifying the transposability of different motor tasks across materially differing contexts. In this sense it amounted to describing our familiarity with the world in the form of a pre-personal knowledge (a "praktognosia") dealing mainly with the *given* aspects of the world based on the immediate apprehension of their sensorimotor signification. Nonetheless, as a principle of identity it could not account for the originary openness of the body, not as directed towards the given aspects of the world, but in the more radical sense of being an openness towards the *non-given*. What is the signification of a phenomenon that cannot be immediately seized across a motor project? How do we account not only for our familiar experiences but also for those experiences that break with our familiarity and throw us outside of our habitual setting? These are the experiences that Merleau-Ponty tries to give a phenomenological account of in redefining the schema as a "diacritical system" (MSME, 174) which is to say, a system of not of identities but of *differences*.

This identification brings us back to the original task motivating the 1953-course, namely the undertaking of a radical redefinition of perception through the concept of expression. As we have seen, expression signifies that meaning of a given phenomenon always exceeds itself because it is originarily experienced as a differential element of the phenomenal field. Otherwise put, it is founded upon what Merleau-Ponty calls the "Diacritical conception of the perceptual sign." "It is the idea that one may perceive differences without terms, divergences in relation to a level which itself is never object" (MSME, 203). Each perceptual "sign" only carries the value of differing from the others and, furthermore, these differences are themselves not defined by their differing terms but rather

⁶⁷ In *The Sensible World* Merleau-Ponty directly borrows this notion from the works of Schilder, rather than through the intermediary of Lhermitte (as in *Phenomenology*).

define these terms in their differing (MSME, 204). As Emmanuel de Saint Aubert points out: "The identity of the terms sketches itself out in the tension of their differences." In thus refusing the traditional grounding of difference upon identity "Merleau-Ponty leaves behind the epistemological framework of the Aristotelian definition [...]: the defined always defined on the ground of [...] the preliminary positivity of a genus within which specific differences are sketched out."⁶⁸ If the schema of the body functions as a diacritical system, then it grounds these differences without itself being posited as a positivity that would subsume them under a prior identity.

Now, this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty attempts to show in *The Sensible World* by introducing the notion of the "split" or "divergence" (*écart*). As he explains, "[p]erceptual consciousness often consists in noticing a split in relation to a level, and this split is the meaning which is thus configuration, structure" (MSME, 50). The "adaptation of a level," in turn, consists in "the promotion of certain elements of the landscape to the dignity of dimensions having systematic values, the installation of our body in a norm" (MSME, 58). The corporeal schema can therefore be defined in the following way: As the level against which phenomena sketch themselves out in differing from it, the schema is a differential norm, a "zero of divergence" (*zéro d'écart*) (MSME, 131). The identity of the appearing thing is not so much constructed upon the concordance of each successive appearance, then, as it is implied in the manner of being of each appearance, in the relative regularity of the way that each perceptual element diverges from the level of normativity established by the schema. It is as if the perceived manifested itself at first as a "coherent deformation," as he puts it elsewhere, borrowing a phrase from André Malreaux.⁶⁹

Now, if each perceptual element or appearance is primarily the mark of a difference with regard to the others then we must concede that their meaning is not produced *at* the phenomena but rather in the spaces *between* them. The expressive relation disclosed at the heart of perception signifies precisely that meaning is not communicated *directly* according to the ideal of eidetic transparency, but *indirectly*, at the margins of the phenomena where their indeterminateness functions as a sollicitation or a call to be perceived. If the appearing is thus dissociated from its indicative function of direct signification, if its meaning is no longer founded upon the identity of the appearing thing, then we may see how the mediation of the

⁶⁸ Emmanuel de Saint Aubert. "Conscience et expression. Avant-propos" in *Le monde sensible*, p. 19.

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty. "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs*, p. 54.

body can be understood as the mediation of an expressive space. As a zero of divergence, the schema of the body cannot ground the differences between each successive appearance on a pre-established system of identities. Instead, it defines them in the very movement of their differing and assures their unity in the coherence of an appearing. The meaning of the phenomenon would then be immanent in the appearing while remaining transcendent to each appearance, just like in the reading of a sentence we proceed from one word to the next only to reach the underlying meaning that subtended them all along. More importantly, we see also how the necessity of the body's mediation does not stand in contradiction with the relative autonomy of the appearing of the phenomenon. In some cases, such as the phenomena of autolocomotion described by Michotte, the phenomenon may even become invested with an interiority, an intention permeating the unfolding of the appearing across its successive phases. "It speaks to me across anthropological space, it tests my capacities for *Einfühlung*. [...] It is an anchorage that understands an anchorage, it is already an *alter ego*" (MSME, 189). Therefore, "it is the mobile that advances and accomplishes its own synthesis" (MSME, 192).⁷⁰ The body only furnishes the phenomenal place of this unfolding.

Now, if the corporeal schema is a principle of unity for the movement of the appearing, it is also a moment of precarity for this unity. Being not only that by which I am solicited by the world but also, more generally, that by which I am *exposed* to the world, the plasticity of the schema which allows the lived body to incorporate seemingly disparate elements into one coherent motor project is also that by which this coherence can be unmade. More importantly, it is precisely when the unity of the schema finds itself threatened or overwhelmed by the presence of the world, bringing about a shift or displacement in its internal organization that its functioning attests itself *as such*, thereby making visible the invisible background of the appearing and letting us perceive, in a circumscribed manner, the perceiving itself.

⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty cites two works by the swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget in support of these claims: *Les notions de mouvement et de vitesse chez l'enfant*, Paris: P.U.F., 1946; *Le développement de la notion de temps chez l'enfant*, Paris: P.U.F., 1946. The supposed "animism" of children, i.e. their tendency to invest inanimate objects with an intentionality, rests upon their understanding of time to be a phenomenon *of the world* and attests to the effective reality of an "anthropological perception" (the latter founded upon the coupling – what Husserl calls *Paarung* – by which we may recognize the other precisely *qua* other *ego*, i.e. as an other intentionality). Cf. MSME, 190; 193.

In *The Sensible World* Merleau-Ponty turns to cinema as being eminently an art-form of this making-visible in that it carries the capacity of transforming our perceptual habits and instituting new levels of normativity on the basis of the corporeal schema. Cinema, studied from the perspective of the movement of the film (and not the actions of the characters), mobilizes the connection between perception and the motricity of the spectator and, in so doing, becomes a means of giving a visible figure to the otherwise imperceived background of perception. In cinema this background takes the form of a rhythm of images which, as we shall see, becomes expressive only because it mobilizes an originary rhythm which does not belong to the film but which is, properly speaking, *of being*.

The Rhythm of Being

Rhythm, as a concept, is only marginally present in the working notes of *The Sensible World*.⁷¹ It is never really explored in its own right, its meaning is never itself submitted to philosophical inquiry. But it is nevertheless that towards which the numerous descriptions of the perception of movement tend, because movement, as a phenomenon, is not only a division of space into a perceived moving figure and a co-perceived immobile background. It is also "an inscription of time," as Merleau-Ponty puts it in the following working note:

Movement as inscription of time. Movement as outline (*tracé*), *i.e.* there is this miracle that temporality, that intention of movement are capable of inscribing themselves in a trace (*trace*), even though in principle nothing of themselves subsists in this trace which is only in space. It is the passage of movement or of actual time to their registered meaning. It is the beginning of sedimentation. [...] My body not only as actual body but as possible body, as "living-machine," as time-making-machine. Study the relation between rhythms or tempos. Is it true that universal and homogenous time is

⁷¹ Indeed, the same could be said of this notion in relation to his whole *œuvre*. This would explain why the idea of "rhythm" is rarely (if ever) explored in relation to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. One notable exception is Jessica Wiskus' study *The Rhythm of Thought. Art Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. In the following we align ourselves to Wiskus' contention that "Expression," if we follow the ontological gesture of Merleau-Ponty's thought, "is instituted as the rhythm of Being" (p. 122). But whereas Wiskus grounds her interpretation on an elaboration of concepts stemming from Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy (such as "depth" and "simultaneity"), set in relation to his understanding of painting, poetry and (above all) music, we, for our part, address the phenomenon of rhythm more directly as a Gestaltic structure of the appearing, and outline it against the ontological problem of thinking the being of form.

presupposed by the tempos? Or rather, must one not, as one does for space, admit that to the contrary time that is universal and without form is a sublimation of temporalities? (MSME, 189-90)

The perception of movement does not reside in a passive impression or a mere registering of time, it depends upon a certain temporality, a *temporal form* which must accord itself to the *spatial form* of the structure of the perceived. Differently put, if a figure is only in movement as a certain inscription of time, it is equally the case that this inscription of time only presents itself as a certain interval – a pulse or a punctuation that articulates the movement into a mobile figure passing against an immobile background. Therefore, the manifestation is always the expression of a certain rhythm, as demonstrated in the experiments of Wertheimer and Michotte. This, we claim, is the true reason why movement and expression are in a reciprocal relation of *Fundierung*: They are both the manifestation of a primordial rhythmic relation between body and world that originarily determines the being of the corporeal schema.

It is the body in its rhythmically existing unity with the world, then, that is the underlying sense of its qualification as a "living-machine" (*machine à vivre*). This term is a reference to Paul Valéry's essay "Poetry and Abstract Thought." In order to understand why this phrase captured Merleau-Ponty's imagination, we must briefly turn to the passage where it occurs. In it, the author recounts the following episode:

I had left my house in order to relax, by walking and the change of scenery thereby entailed, from some tedious work. As I walked along the street where I live, I was suddenly *seized* by a rhythm that imposed itself on me, and which soon gave me the impression of some alien functioning. It was as if someone was making use of my living-machine. Then another rhythm overtook and combined with the first; and it established some kind of *transversal* relation between these two laws (I am explaining myself as best I can). They combined the movements of my walking legs and some kind of song I was murmuring, or rather that murmured itself *through me*. This composition gained in complexity and soon grew well beyond anything that I might reasonably have produced according to my ordinary and utilizable rhythmic faculties. The sense of strangeness that I mentioned become almost painful, almost disquieting. I am not a musician; I am completely ignorant of musical technique; yet nevertheless I was the prey of a development in several parts, of a complexity which no poet could ever dream of. I told myself that therefore there must have been some error of person, that this grace had been mistaken, because I could make nothing of such a gift – which, in a musician, had without a doubt taken on a value, form and duration, while these parts that intermingled and broke free truly offered to me in vain

a composition whose learned and organized continuation filled my ignorance with wonder and drove it to despair.⁷²

This passage shows in a remarkable way how the very plasticity of the corporeal schema, permitting the perceiving subject to encompass seemingly disparate elements across a unified sensori-motor project, entails also an *exposure* to sense, or even non-sense. Whereas it is true that the function of the schema is to assure that our free corporeal effectuation unfolds in a more or less harmonious communication with the world, the notion of the living-machine draws our attention to the inherent possibility of this communication breaking down. In this unsettling of the intentional lines that tie us to the world as our familiar setting, the world becomes experienced as an imposing presence, as an intrusive force. The sensation of which Valéry writes manifests what Merleau-Ponty often refers to as a "style of being," but it is a style that, far from being given as a concrete signification, signifies rather the absence of signification – an absence, moreover, that is *felt as such* in its rhythmic presence. But the passage also bears witness to the spontaneous creativity of the corporeal schema, the possibility of its undertaking an organized relation to the world, without the intervention of any conscious thought, "of a complexity which no poet could ever dream of." Now, it is precisely this living-machine rhythmically existing its creative unity with the world in an exposure to the world which is the subject of cinema. Indeed, cinema actively puts into play this creativity at the heart of perception because, as an artform, it is a *recreation* of it.

As a continuous projection of images at organized intervals, cinema is a "universal expression *by* movement." The mobility of the cinematographic medium opposes it to traditional painting or sculpture which are essentially the expression *of* movement in an immobile medium. (MSME, 95; 126). Indeed, the mobile medium of cinema follows the same principle of stroboscopic movement as Wertheimer's experimental apparatus. But whereas experimental psychology, in its attempts to provide an etiological framework sufficiently well-defined to explain inductively the psychological *fact* of movement (how it can be that we perceive movement without there *objectively* being a mobile present), only describes the phenomenon of movement in the artificial conditions of the laboratory (that is, proceeding from pre-defined parameters that allow the experimenter to study certain elements of the perceptual situation in isolation), it cannot describe the underlying significance of movement such as it appears in the phenomenal field. In other words, "what remains to be

⁷² Paul Valéry. *Œuvres I*, Paris: Gallimard, "La Pléiade," 1957, p. 1322.

investigated is the apprehension of movement as a modality of a *total contact* with the field” (MSME, 95),⁷³ *including* the historical and cultural sedimentations that consciously or unconsciously motivate the perceiving subject. This is precisely what cinema manages to carry out:

When I arrive at the cinema I carry with me sensory and cultural fields, *i.e.* a system entirely arranged around relations of signs-significations. But the film is only a work of art if it plays with this system by splits (*écarts*) in relation to it that realize emblems for significations that I do not possess. (MSME, 170)

The sensible world displaced by the world of expression which installs itself in it, we apply our eyes to invisible cultural things, we articulate the visible according to significations that transcend it, – but that were already at work within it. (Ibid)

Far from being a reproduction of movement (that is, the illusion of movement), cinema (and indeed the visual arts in general) invents ”emblems” of movement, which is to say sensible signs or traces of movement, a meaning immanent to the arrangement of the sensible communicating itself the open-ended motricity of the spectator. It is a recreation of our perception in the sense that the image-plane, the cutting, the montage, the sound (and so on), all come together in a total contact to articulate a meaningful whole (the virtual center of which would be the movie camera, an image-making-machine which, just like the living-machine of the body, projects around itself a virtual world). Indeed, just like the intrinsic structure of the film is described as a ”presentation by divergences in relation to a norm that is never given itself,” as a ”[p]resentation of the world by variations of modulations of our being in the world” (MSME, 168), so the immanent meaning seized on in ”natural” (non-cinematographic) perception is described by Merleau-Ponty as a ”montage” (MSME, 175). Now, this parallellism between natural and artificial perception, we maintain, is only possible because they are both, in the last instance, modulations of the rhythmic presence of our being-in-the-world. And it is in this way that, between the rhythm of the image and the rhythm of the body, an expressive space is opened up which is the *place* where we originally perceive the film, there where our intentionality meets up with the intentionality of the spectacle, and where the sensible world begins to signify.

To illustrate this, Merleau-Ponty mentions a scene from Jean Vigo’s *Zéro de conduite* (1933) in which a group of children stage a rebellion in the dormitory of their boarding

⁷³ My emphasis.

school. Pillows are thrown, feathers fly through the air and the children parade through the room, parodying a religious procession, in a dreamlike slow-motion sequence. Accompanying this sequence is a musical score written by Maurice Jaubert, transcribed "backwards" for the occasion, recorded and finally played back in reverse, producing a recognizable melody but with an air of mystery and disorientation emerging from the mechanically produced distortion. Merleau-Ponty's notes refer specifically to the impression of "strangeness" and "irreality" (MSME, 113; 119) produced by the co-functioning of the slow-motion sequence and the reversal of the score.

The slow motion as well as the inversed music dissociate the physiognomy or the dynamics of movement in so far as it is tied to a certain perceptive tempo (image) and to a certain profile of intensity (sound). Therefore, one perceives movement, its meaning, its characteristic allure, by the motor possibilities of the body proper." (MSME, 119)

There are several points to be made here. First, even if I try, I cannot see perceive the slow-motion sequence as the "same" movement in normal speed (MSME, 117): it is ineluctably deprived of the particular interiority or intentionality that in contrast animates the physiognomy of normal movement (in this case normal "self-movement"). As Merleau-Ponty will later describe it: "Slow motion shows a body being carried along, floating among objects like seaweed, but not moving itself."⁷⁴ It is as if the body in slow motion projected around itself its own "element" of being, an aquatic *Umwelt* recognizable as such from its algae-like *style* of movement. This suggests furthermore that my ability to recognize other subjectivities, my capacity for empathy (*Einfühlung*) is originarily determined, or at the very least co-determined, by the way that their movements are rhythmically deployed. Secondly, this example illustrates the inherent capacity of cinema of unsettling or breaking our normal relation to the world, of varying our perspective on the world by a kind of projective displacement of it, focused around the virtual center of the film corresponding to the perspective instituted by the level of normativity of the camera. To illustrate this second point, Merleau-Ponty refers to Jean Epstein's characterization of the slow motion technique as a "degradation of forms," and the capacity of the cinematographic image to reveal bodies in their primordial viscosity. The passage referred to is the following:

Conversely, during a slow motion projection we observe a degradation of forms as they undergo a diminuation of their mobility and thus lose their vital quality. Human semblance, for instance, is

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty. *Eye and Mind*, trans. Michael B. Smith, in Johnson, Galen A. (ed.) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1933, p. 145.

deprived in large part of its spirituality. Thought vanishes in the human gaze and becomes numb and illegible upon the face. In gestures, awkwardness – a sign of will and the ransom of freedom – disappears, absorbed by the infallible grace of animal instinct. The whole human body is but a being of smooth muscle swimming in a dense medium, in which thick currents always carry and shape this clear descendant of the old marine fauna and maternal waters. Regression reaches even further, beyond the animal stage. It rediscovers, in the movements of the torso or the neck, the active elasticity of the stem; in the undulating of hair or a horse mane, the swaying of a forest; in the beating of fins and wings, the palpitating of leaves; in the coiling and uncoiling of reptiles, the spiral sense of all vegetal growth. Slowed down even more, any living substance goes back to its fundamental viscosity and lets its deep colloidal nature rise to the surface. Finally, when there is no longer any visible movement in a sufficiently stretched time, humans become statues, the living merges with the inert, the universe devolves into a desert of pure matter without any trace of spirit.⁷⁵

The regression of forms put into work by the slow-motion technique discloses a kind of universal expressiveness of the natural world, one in which the human is the expression of the animal, the animal of the vegetal, and so on until the point where movement and time merge in the inertia of pure inanimate matter. It reveals not beings but manners of being, not particular movements but rhythms that determine, at each stage of the sequence, the being of the perceived. By the artifice of the camera, articulating the corporeal schema around a virtual center and incarnating it, as it were, in a "second body," the cinematographer places perception at a distance from itself and discovers thereby an expressiveness at the heart of the sensible world, articulating the visible, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, according to significations that transcend it but that were already at work within it. The film does not so much *reproduce* the visible, to invoke the words of Paul Klee, as *make* visible the ground of visibility itself.

It is for this reason that we cannot agree with Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky when she writes that Merleau-Ponty opposes "the perspective of rationalist and scientific thinking," which is purportedly that of slow-motion technique, to the "situated partial perspective of perception" which would be that of "corporeality." The artificiality of the slow-motion sequence would, according to such a reading, belong to a "rationalist tradition" because "technology intervenes in the customary perception of the world and does not adapt to the intimacy of body and mind described by the philosopher." In this interpretation, then, slow-

⁷⁵ Jean Epstein. *The Intelligence of a Machine*, trans. Christophe Wall-Romana, Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014, p. 29. Merleau-Ponty refers to this passage in MSME, p. 116-17.

motion technique would be synonymous with "deception."⁷⁶ In a similar vein, Clélia Zernik suggests that "because cinematographic perception does not respond to the conditions of ordinary perception [...] it cannot be approached by phenomenology," in Merleau-Ponty's analyses.⁷⁷ But are we justified in positing such a strict opposition between the natural and artificial in Merleau-Ponty's thinking?

To the contrary, we would like to suggest that, far from being opposed to the perceptual normativity of the body, the artificial and the technical are, in a more radical sense, extensions of its expressive spatiality. To the commentators cited above we might therefore respond with Stefan Kristensen that "[t]he eye of the body and the eye of the camera are two variants of the same type of being-in-the-world."⁷⁸ Indeed, it is the very artificiality of the cinematographic image which enables it to give us a visible figure of the invisible ground of perception – one that founds the very transcendence of the world – because it confronts us, in a way which would not be possible in "normal" perception, with a

⁷⁶ Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid. "The Paradox of a Gesture, Enlarged by the Distension of Time: Merleau-Ponty and Lacan on a Slow-Motion Picture of Henri Matisse Painting," in *Performance Philosophy*, vol. 3, 2017, pp. 58f; 63.

⁷⁷ Clélia Zernik. "Un film ne se pense pas, il se perçoit." Merleau-Ponty et la perception cinématographique," in *Rue Descartes*, vol. 3, no. 53, 2006, p. 108. This sentiment is shared also by Daniele Rugo who states that Merleau-Ponty's discourse on cinema "undermines its ability to establish a connection with the world." "Exactitude and Partiality. Merleau-Ponty and Nancy on Cinema," in *Chiasmi International*, no. 19, 2018, p. 207. Indeed, it is precisely for this purported privileging of "natural perception" over its cinematographic counterpart that Deleuze reproaches Merleau-Ponty. *Cinéma 1. L'image-mouvement*, Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1983, p. 84. Now, these objections are in fact partly justified given Merleau-Ponty's contention at one instance that "[c]inematographic drama is [...] finer-grained than real-life dramas: it takes place in a world that is more exact than the real world," and that "in the last analysis" it is "perception [that] permits us to understand the meaning of cinema" (Merleau-Ponty. "The Film and the New Psychology," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus & Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), as well as his argument in *Phenomenology* that in cinema, contrary to natural perception, "the screen has no horizons" (PhP, 70). Yet they nevertheless fail to capture the core of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of cinema. The essence of cinema is not to be found in the cinematographic image taken in isolation or in its differing from normal vision, but in the spaces *between* the images instituted by the movement of the film itself, the latter conceived not as a succession or sum total of images, but as their rhythmic deployment in a temporal Gestalt (the montage, the editing, etc.). It seems to us that as these readings take as their point of departure the *difference* between "cinematographic" and "natural" perception they fail to see what *unites* them, namely expression, and in what sense the one might instruct us of the essence of the other.

⁷⁸ Kristensen. Art. cit. p. 134.

visibly profound cohesion between the rhythm of images and their sensible meaning. Moreover, it accomplishes this feat precisely because it is communicated to the body of the spectator; the latter understood not merely as a passive receptor of images, but as the hinge which ties the images together, the place of their rhythmic appearing. The expressivity of the image stems not from its corresponding to "customary perception" but from the rhythmic dimension of its appearing. Differently put, as a diacritical sign it carries a meaning which is not enclosed in it but that transcends it, that signifies only in referring to other images according to a principle which is nowhere present as such yet which animates at each instant the structure of the film (or of the sequence) like a hidden intention. As Vivian Sobchack puts it: "Seeing is an act performed by both the film (which sees a world as visible images) and the viewer (who sees the film's visible images both as a world and the seeing of a world)."⁷⁹ Because it offers itself as a way of seeing, as a certain perspective on the world, the film de-centers the schema of the body, forcing the viewer to adjust the level of normativity of his or her perception so that, strictly speaking, we do not see the images but rather *according* to them in what we might call a veritable *education of the gaze*. Cinema, as a variation of the gaze, gives us not only the appearance of things (or the appearance of movement), but the very manner of their appearing, precisely because it manages to give visible form to the invisible background animating the appearing. In short, because it shows us a virtual perspective on the world where the perceiving of the world is manifestly synonymous with its rhythmic appearing.

We are now in a better position to explain our proposition according to which the body as an expressive space is the place where the world comes to itself *qua* world: As an openness to the world the corporeal schema signifies not only the motor power of the body as a presence to the world, but also the relative autonomy of the world in its presence from this mobility. Being simultaneously a perspective on the world and a part of the world, it is an incarnation of transcendence by which the world can be present as an inexhaustible horizon of possibilities. However, as an expressive space the body is also the place of the event of expression where the world begins to signify "in its nascent state." Therefore, its *openness to* the world must also be understood in the more fundamental sense of being an *opening of* the world, one which lets the world be the place, as it were, of its own taking place. In short, the appearing of the world to the lived body is none other than the appearing of the world to itself

⁷⁹ Vivian Sobchack. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 56.

in the passage of its sensible being towards expression (of which the lesson of cinema is perhaps the most striking example). Because the world is always transcendent, always given at a distance – and because perception is the spatio-temporal form of this distance – its meaning is originally communicated as a call to be perceived, as a sollicitation for the body to transcend what is presently given and to institute itself around a new level of normativity; an attitude that would correspond to what in the appearing is not present (except in an ambiguous or non-determinate manner) and, as a consequence, to what is not the mere projection of the motor possibilities of the body. The reception of the expressive event therefore rests upon an openness also towards the non-given of the appearing and, as such, cannot be grounded upon the sensorimotor power of the corporeal schema in its actual or habitual configuration. As a "something" that passes without being determined as "this" or "that" thing, the event is *of* the world yet nonetheless not of the order of the in-itself. As the coming of the world *to* itself by which it begins to exist *for* itself it is only an event in that it begins to exist *for someone* as a continuous movement of transcendence. In short, the event, in order to take place, must ultimately be mediated by the structure of the corporeal schema – a structure which, conceived of as a diacritical system, is not to be understood primarily as the "ground" of the appearing, but in the more radical sense as being the place of the appearing where the very movement of the appearing of beings may be brought into appearance.

Far from marking a system of positively assignable correlations between subject and world the structure of the body remains constantly at grips with a dimension of negativity in the perceived. It functions by tying together the different aspects of sensible beings, not by subsuming them under a preliminary identity, but by becoming the expressive space where these aspects become communicative, indicative of a world manifesting itself in the tension instituted by them in the process of their differing. Thus, correlative to the opening of the world in the event of expression we find a corresponding transformation of the schema giving a more or less stabilized existence to the fleeting manifestation of the sensible forms thereby disclosed. Rhythm, understood as the co-becoming of world and body in their continuing exchange, is the element of this transformation and of this opening. The transformation thus consists in nothing else than the installation of the body in a certain rhythm of being, one in which meaning originally presents itself not directly at the phenomena, but in the interval or intersection between them which is synonymous with the rhythmical structure of their manifestation. Meaning *insists*, as Proust says, upon the gestures by which the body leaves itself behind, by which it is dispossessed of itself in a rhythmic becoming, before consenting

to manifest itself in the form of an ideality that we possess only to the degree that we let ourselves be possessed by it.

We would like to suggest that the notion of rhythm, for Merleau-Ponty, becomes a way of thinking a sensible sense of Being, more exactly in its capacity of bringing into appearance the being of beings, what Merleau-Ponty calls their "style of being," from within the movement of their appearing. It would thus designate the configuration assumed at each instant by the movement, the temporal form by which an appearing begins to signify before being subjected to eidetic identification. Rhythm, we conclude, is thus a sensible figure of being bringing into appearance the movement of the appearing of beings. It seems then that the formula which states that "movement reveals being" is fundamentally tied to an ontological understanding of this being as rhythmically formed. Does the notion of rhythm thus described have consequences for how we are to understand the ontological dimension of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of form? As this question cannot be satisfyingly answered here, we shall limit ourselves to a brief indication of one possible way of approaching it in some concluding remarks.

Conclusions and Trajectories

It seems that "form" for Merleau-Ponty is a notion that carries two meanings. These two meanings are in turn related to the two functions that form serves in Merleau-Ponty's discourse on perception. On the one hand it is used critically as a quasi-epistemological category, employed with the intent of showing at which point the theories of empiricism and intellectualism run aground (and in this sense, we have shown, the Gestaltist critique serves the purpose of a genuine phenomenological reduction). On the other hand it serves a positive function in the attempt to think the meaning of the being of form such as it comes to manifestation in expression. The epistemological meaning of form states that the perceived always assumes the figure-ground structure (signifying a figurative dimension of form), whereas the ontological meaning of form designates the originary manifestation of the world in the event of expression (signifying a genetic dimension of form).

These two significations, it seems to us, correspond to what Henri Maldiney judges to be the two fundamental dimensions of form in the figurative arts, present in what he calls the "action" of form (we might say its "self-formation").

The action of a form is that by which *a form forms itself*: it is its autogenesis. A figurative form therefore has two dimensions: one "intentional-representative" dimension according to which it is image, and one "genetic-rhythmic" which precisely makes it a form. The rhythm of the form dictates and assumes the motricity of the image, and it determinates the affective tonality according to which – before all sensible objective representation – we haunt the world in a significative manner across the image.⁸⁰

If in trying to think the being of form we are led to the genesis of form (where form begins to signify in its nascent state), then we are forced to consider also the formation of form, or its transformation, as its properly genetic dimension. Without a referent and without a model, the form is what forms itself in simultaneously forming the space of its formation. "This meaning of form in formation, in perpetual transformation, in the return of the same," Maldiney adds, "is properly the meaning of rhythm."⁸¹ Form, in its rhythmic presence, is indissociable from the space which it both carries and opens. Its signification is one with its manifestation. It seems that this description of rhythm as form forming itself, as a formation dictating and assuming motricity in an absolute and immediate fashion, corresponds to what Merleau-Ponty, following the Gestaltists, calls "pregnancy" (*Prägnanz*); that is, the very dialectics of distance and proximity, sollicitation and response that motivates perception and calls for it to install itself around a level of normativity that would promote the apparition of "good forms." As he would later put it in a working note:

Pregnancy: the psychologists forget that this means a power to break forth, productivity (*praegnans futuri*), fecundity – secondarily: it means "typicality." It is the form that has arrived at itself, that *is itself*, that poses itself by its own means, is the equivalent of the cause of itself [...], auto-regulation, cohesion of self with self, identity in depth (dynamic identity), transcendence as being-at-a-distance [...]. The pregnancy is what, in the visible, requires of me a *correct* focusing, defines its correctness. My body *obeys* the pregnancy, it "responds" to it, it is what is suspended on it, flesh responding to flesh. (VI, 208-09)

Pregnancy is the arriving of form at itself whereby it begins to exist for itself. As this relation of "self-with-self" it denotes a *reflectivity* of form synonymous with the movement by which

⁸⁰ Henri Maldiney. *Regard, Parole, Espace*, Paris: Les editions du CERF, 2012, p. 213.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

the sensible world comes to itself and begins to exist for itself in the autonomous dimension of its expressiveness. The lived body simply provides a place for this movement, it "obeys" the pregnancy or "responds" to it. Therefore, far from the reflectivity of the world being modelled upon the reflectivity of the sensing body, we are confronted instead with a reflectivity *interior to being* from whence the two ultimately draw their meaning. From this perspective the lived body is simultaneously the unique *possibility* of this reflectivity coming to expression as the experience of the transcendence of the world, and an *incarnation* of this reflectivity, which is to say a figure *of* transcendence.⁸² Rather than thinking the *being of form*, pregnancy would thus invite us to think *form as being, as reflectivity*. Nonetheless (to return to our suggestion above), in the Merleau-Pontian discourse on pregnancy ("form arriving at itself," "auto-regulation," "identity in depth" or "dynamic identity"), are we not confronted precisely with the "perpetual transformation" in "the return of the same," which for Maldiney designates the being of rhythm? As this question falls outside of the scope of our investigation, we shall limit ourselves to merely indicating the potential fruitfulness of bringing these two thinkers together on this issue.

Following Merleau-Ponty in thinking the being of form we have been led to a preliminary understanding of rhythm as the sensible manifestation of form. As a sensible figure of being, rhythm brings into appearance the very movement of the appearing of beings. Indeed, it only becomes comprehensible from within this movement because, far from being anterior to the manifestation as the law of its appearing, rhythm is indissociably bound up with the appearing. A single appearance has no rhythmic meaning. Rhythm only begins, as it were, with the second appearance and in the relationship that it establishes with the first. This is why the conductor of an orchestra initiates the performance with an "empty" beat, or why we must always take a first hesitant step before launching ourselves into the movements of a dance. Between the first moment and the second a transversal relation is established, lending their succession, as Valéry tells us, a dimension of simultaneity.⁸³ Because rhythm signifies nothing but the movement of appearing we see then how across this transversal relation the manifestation of form and its signification are one.

⁸² For a similar interpretation, cf. Mariana Larison. *L'Être en forme. Dialectique et phénoménologie dans la dernière philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*, Milan/Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2016.

⁸³ Valéry. *Cahiers*, 1.1, Paris: Gallimard, "La Pléiade," 1973, p. 173. "In the rhythm, the successive has some properties of the simultaneous."

Now, if the rhythmic dimension of form does not lend itself easily to phenomenological description we should not conclude that this failure stems from the nature of the phenomena. Rather it is the expression of a lack intrinsic to language as such as it accustomed to expressing beings and not manners of being. Sartre was well aware of this in asking if, instead of stating that “the fish are swimming” (*le poisson nage*) we wouldn’t stay more true to the phenomena in saying “the swim is fishing” (*la nage poissonne*).⁸⁴ To Sartre we might respond that the problem of philosophy becomes that of simultaneously thinking the validity of these two statements, that is how the appearing is at once animated by an intentional-representative dimension and a genetic-rhythmic dimension, and that form always manifests itself across these two dimensions in its sensible being. However, because language itself is constructed according to the categories of an objective ontology, we lack the words to properly express this effective reality of form in positive terms. Here, the problem of form merges with that of language and indeed with philosophy itself: How can we account for a dimension of meaning stemming from the very depth of the sensible world without thereby transforming this depth and this transcendence in bringing it onto the surface of an expressed ideality? But what is a lack at the level of language (*langage*) is a resource at the level of speech (*parole*), to make use of a distinction so important to Merleau-Ponty. It is what makes speech be a saying headed towards what is yet to be said, not as a statement or a reference to a state of affairs, but as a hidden intention animating its expression, like a unity without a concept or like a meaning that only appears across its variations. We see then how form has a sense, a speech, and that phenomenology for Merleau-Ponty is but an attempt to speak the language of form.

Summary

We set out in search for a meaning of form in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty that would surmount the inherent limitations of a philosophical tradition encumbered by the categories of objective thought. To identify his own understanding of this concept it became necessary to make a distinction between the *psychological question of form* and the *philosophical question of form*. Only on the ground of this distinction, we suggested, can one

⁸⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 397.

approach the ontological question regarding the being of form. In the first part of our investigation we strived to show how Merleau-Ponty approaches this question through phenomenology and makes it its central concern. Whereas Gestalt psychology understands form as an event of nature, ultimately subordinating it to an etiological framework in the principle of isomorphism, phenomenology understands form as a structure of meaning, which is to say a structure of intentionality. We therefore tried to show how Merleau-Ponty attempts to integrate the Gestaltic structure of the appearing, that is its always assuming the figure-ground distinction, to the phenomenological problem of incarnation and, correlatively, to the problem of accounting for a bodily, pre-thetic intentionality. Drawing on such notions as "operative intentionality," the "corporeal schema" and "motivation," we described how Merleau-Ponty tries to account for a nascent meaning of the perceived in which form would not designate the fully constituted or determined thing, individuated in a point of space and time, but rather the emerging of the thing such as it is indicated by its manner of articulating space and time. This, we concluded, leads Merleau-Ponty to an affirmation of the coinciding of the reality and phenomenality of form. The being of form is to be found nowhere else than within the movement of its appearing that the philosopher terms "expression."

In the second part of our investigation we attempted to describe in greater detail the notion of expression and its relevance for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of form. Drawing on the lecture notes from his 1953 course at the Collège de France we endeavored to show how his re-definition of form in terms of a "diacritical structure" allows us to understand expression as being interiorly animated by a certain absence or negativity. Expression, Merleau-Ponty now suggests, means that each phenomenon signifies only in referring to other phenomena in a movement of differing, and subsequently only becomes indicative of the appearing in the figure of a certain circumscribed absence. As such, it denotes not only a relation to what is phenomenally given but also, and more importantly, to a dimension of the non-given of perception. The Gestalt, then, is thought from within the event of its appearing by shifting the focus towards the movement itself of its phenomenalization. From this perspective the figure-ground distinction acquires a distinctly temporal determination as the "inscription" of time in a spatial "trace." Merleau-Ponty terms this inscription "rhythm." In our proposed reading, this is the essential lesson of his descriptions of the phenomenon of movement. A figure is only in movement as a certain inscription of time, an inscription that furthermore only presents itself as a certain interval according to a pulse or a punctuation that articulates the movement into a mobile figure passing against an immobile background. The

manifestation of movement is therefore synonymous, in our reading, with the manifestation of rhythm. We then concluded that rhythm is a sensible figure of being which brings into appearance the movement of the appearing of beings. In this sense, rhythm constitutes the sensible manifestation of form in the event of its appearing. In raising the question of the being of form in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology we were therefore led to the necessity of thinking the meaning of rhythm as the sensible manifestation of form.

In conclusion we posited that the notion of form has two meaning-functions in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. One epistemological, stating that the perceived always assumes the figure-ground structure (signifying a figurative dimension of form). Another ontological according to which form designates the originary manifestation of the world in the event of expression (signifying a genetic dimension of form). Finally, we found that these two meanings of form roughly correspond to what Henri Maldiney terms the "intentional-representative" and the "genetic-rhythmic" dimensions of form. We proposed that in order to think conclusively the meaning of the being of form – a question which, at the end of his life, Merleau-Ponty was still struggling with (as attested to by a number of working-notes) – it might prove fruitful to bring together the similar yet in many respects significantly differing perspectives of these two thinkers, converging upon a phenomenological sense what one might term a general rhythmicity of being.

Works cited:

Apostolopolous, Dimitris. "Intentionality, Constitution and Merleau-Ponty's Concept of 'The Flesh'," in *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2016, pp. 677-699.

Ash, Mitchell G. *Gestalt psychology in German culture, 1890-1967. Holism and the Quest for Objectivity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Barbaras, Renaud. *The Being of the Phenomenon*, trans. Ted Toadvine & Leonard Lawlor, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004.

"Merleau-Ponty et la psychologie de la forme," *Les Études philosophiques*, no. 2 2001, pp. 151-163.

"Perception and Movement: The End of the Metaphysical Approach," in Evans & Lawlor, 2000.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinéma 1. L'image-mouvement*, Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1983.

Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid. "The Paradox of a Gesture, Enlarged by the Distension of Time: Merleau-Ponty and Lacan on a Slow-Motion Picture of Henri Matisse Painting," in *Performance Philosophy*, vol. 3, 2017, pp. 54-66.

Epstein, Jean. *The Intelligence of a Machine*, trans. Christophe Wall-Romana, Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014.

Escoubas, Eliane. "La question de l'œuvre d'art: Merleau-Ponty et Heidegger," in Marc Richir & Étienne Tassin (eds.), *Merleau-Ponty: Phénoménologie et expériences*, Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2008.

Evans, Fred & Lawlor, Leonard (eds.). *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Fink, Eugen. *Problèmes actuels de la phénoménologie*, H.L. von Breda (ed.), Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952.

Foultier, Anna Petronella. *Recasting Objective Thought: The Venture of Expression in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Doctoral thesis), Stockholm: Department of Philosophy, Stockholm University, 2015.

Hardy, Jean-Sébastien. "Sens du mouvement et kinesthèse. La Découverte du 'Concept phénoménologique de mouvement' dans *Chose et Espace* de Husserl," in Sylvain Camilleri & Jean-Sébastien Hardy (eds.), *Ens mobile. Conceptions phénoménologiques du mouvement*, Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2018.

Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

Formal and Transcendental Logic, trans. Dorion Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969.

Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book. General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. Fred Kersten, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983.

Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book. Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution, trans. Richard Rojcewicz & André Schuwer, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989.

Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907, trans. Richard Rojcewicz, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997.

Johnson, Galen A. (ed.) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

Koffka, Kurt. "Perception: An introduction to the *Gestalt-theorie*," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 19, 1922, pp. 531-585.

Principles of Gestalt Psychology, London: Kegan Paul, 1936.

Kristensen, Stefan. "Maurice Merleau-Ponty, une esthétique du mouvement," in *Archives de Philosophie*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2006, pp. 123-146.

Köhler, Wolfgang. *Die Physischen Gestalten in Ruhe und im stationären Zustand: Eine naturphilosophische Untersuchung*, Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1920.

The Selected Papers of Wolfgang Köhler, ed. Mary Henle, New York: Liveright, 1971.

”Über unbemerkte Empfindungen und Urteilstäuschungen,” *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, vol. 66, 1913, pp. 51-80

Larison, Mariana. *L'Être en forme. Dialectique et phénoménologie dans la dernière philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*, Milan/Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2016.

Maldiney, Henri. *Regard, Parole, Espace*, Paris: Les éditions du CERF, 2012.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*, trans. Talia Welsh, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010.

Eye and Mind, trans. Michael B. Smith, in Johnson, 1933.

Le Monde Sensible et le Monde de l'Expression: Cours au Collège de France, Notes 1953, Genève: Métis Presses, 2011.

”The Nature of Perception,” trans. Forrest W. Williams, in Sallis, 1981.

Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Donald A. Landes, London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

”Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch’s *The Field of Consciousness*,” trans. Elizabeth Locey & Ted Toadvine, *Husserl Studies*, vol. 17, 2001, pp. 173-193.

Sense and Non-Sense, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus & Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964

Signs, trans. Richard C. McCleary, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

The Structure of Behavior, trans. Alden L. Fisher, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963.

The Visible and the Invisible, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Michotte, Albert. *La perception de la causalité*, Paris: Vrin, 1946.

Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time, vol. 1, Swann's Way*, (trans.) C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised D. J. Enright, New York: Modern Library, 1998.

Rostenthal, Victor & Visetti, Yves-Marie. "Sens et temps de la Gestalt," *Intellectica*, vol. 1, no. 28, 1999, pp. 147-227.

Rugo, Daniele. "Exactitude and Partiality. Merleau-Ponty and Nancy on Cinema," in *Chiasmi International*, No. 19, 2018, pp. 201-219.

Saint Aubert, Emmanuel de. "Conscience et expression. Avant-propos," in Merleau-Ponty, 2011.

Sallis, John (ed.), *Merleau-Ponty. Perception, Structure, Language: A Collection of Essays*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Sobchack, Vivian. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Smith, Barry. *Austrian Philosophy. The Legacy of Franz Brentano*, Chicago: Open Court, 1994.

Stein, Edith. *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, trans. Mary Catherine Baseheart & Marianne Sawicki, Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000.

Valéry, Paul. *Cahiers*, 1.1, Paris: Gallimard, "La Pléiade," 1973.

Œuvres 1, Paris: Gallimard, "La Pléiade," 1957.

Waldenfels, Bernhard. "The Paradox of Expression," in Evans & Lawlor, 2000.

"Voir par images. Merleau-Ponty sur le tracé de la peinture," in Emmanuel Alloa & Adnen Jdey (ed.), *Du sensible à l'oeuvre: esthétiques de Merleau-Ponty*, Bruxelles: La lettre volée, 2012.

Wertheimer, Max. *On Perceived Motion and Figural Organization*, (ed.) Lothar Spillman, Cambridge & London: The MIT press, 2012.

“Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt. I. Prinzipielle Bemerkungen,” in *Psychologische Forschung*, vol. 1, 1922, pp. 47-58.

Wiskus, Jessica. *The Rhythm of Thought. Art Literature, and Music after Merleau-Ponty*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Wrathall, Mark A. “Motives, Reasons, and Causes,” in (ed.) Taylor Carman, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Zahavi, Dan. “Husserl’s Phenomenology of the Body,” in *Études Phénoménologiques* No. 19 1994, pp. 63-84.

Zernik, Clélia. “‘Un film ne se pense pas, il se perçoit.’ Merleau-Ponty et la perception cinématographique,” in *Rue Descartes*, vol. 3, no. 53, 2006, pp. 102-109.