

Članak je primljen: 25. decembar 2011.

Revidirana verzija: 10. januar 2012.

Prihvaćena verzija: 15. januar 2012.

UDC: 165.62 Merlo-Ponti M. ; 7.01:165.62 ; 159.937:165.62

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Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Visual Perception as a Bodily Phenomenon

Summary: In her article the author focuses on Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of visual perception that arises from his original concept of the body which extends beyond the empiricist and intellectualist explanations of the body that rest upon Cartesian dualism. Instead, Merleau-Ponty discusses the live, active and cognizant body. He presents visual perception as a complex phenomenon which is neither completely objective nor completely subjective, but instead rooted deeply in the body schema which is of key importance for the understanding of space, depth and movement, i.e. phenomena that remain relevant today and due to which remains relevant also Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological existential approach that underlines the significance of pre-reflexive experience.

Keywords: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, visual perception, phenomenology of perception, space, depth, movement

Although the interest in visual perception is with us since prehistory (an interest in optical phenomena can be documented since the emergence of writing) even today we still don't possess satisfactory explanations of numerous visual phenomena that could aid us in adequately understanding of visual artworks. In spite of numerous and very heterogeneous theories which could be roughly divided into two theoretical paradigms, i.e. theories of indirect perception (the so-called top-down theories) and theories of direct perception (the so-called bottom-up theories) even in the twenty-first century visual perception remains hidden behind a veil of mystery. Among the unresolved phenomena belong issues such as the perception of space, depth and movement that are to be discussed below.

The research into theories that can be detected since al-Kindi (801–873) and Greek thinkers of antiquity to Newton, Kepler and Descartes is important for a better understanding of theories that have been developed in the twentieth century and that have led us to the currently predominant cognitive explanations of perception that take as their point of departure the analogy between the processing of information in computer software and the processing of information in the brain. Merleau-Ponty's theory of visual perception that emerges from his original concept of the body also came into existence as a critique of previous theories which he divided into

empiricist and intellectualist ones. The former he criticized for not discussing live body but the abstract, dead body instead, while the latter were criticized for forgetting, in their accentuation of subjectivity, the actual body. Only via *Gestalt* theory that was developed in the beginning of the twentieth century, and phenomenology as his fundamental starting point, has Merleau-Ponty overcome the Cartesian dualist treatment of visual perception, thereby offering an alternative explanation of visual phenomena. Let me at this point underline that the understanding of the laws or rules of visuality is important both for painting as well as for the visual arts in general, for artworks themselves raise our awareness of the complexity of perception which is not reduced to optics in its mathematical-geometric sense. It is therefore not surprising that Merleau-Ponty found especially on the terrain of fine art (especially painting) the paradigmatic case that reveals the functioning of our pre-reflexive visual experience of which Merleau-Ponty says that it is older than thinking.

Numerous factors affect our perception, such as consciousness, the unconscious (such as the unconscious reasoning mentioned already by Helmholtz), experiences, cultural determinacy, etc. Nonetheless, all this does not signify that our perception is completely subjective for the *Gestalt* theorists to whom Merleau-Ponty referred on numerous occasions, have shown the validity of certain principles of cognitive organization. Our perception is not completely objective either, for our eye in contrast to a photographic camera very selectively records sensations. Merleau-Ponty's theory is important for the understanding of visual perception especially since it also reveals via the works of fine art the complex nature of the visual that painters have often discovered and uncovered intuitively, through the process of painting.

In his *Structure of Behavior* (1942) Merleau-Ponty described visual perception as a "beam of light that reveals objects where they are and announces their presence which was until then latent. No matter whether I perceive myself or observe another perceiving subject it seems to me that the gaze *places* itself on the objects and reaches them at a distance as expressed well by the use of the Latin word *lumine* to mark the gaze."¹ Reading his description one is inevitably reminded of the so-called *haptic theory* defended already by the ancient Greeks, although not in literal but in metaphoric sense; the function of light as well as its source, was well-known already at the time of Kepler and Newton. The metaphor *touching with the gaze* is present in Merleau-Ponty from his early works up to *The Visible and the Invisible* where he wrote that "since vision is a palpation with the look, it must also be inscribed in the order of being that it discloses to us; he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at."²

It is typical for Merleau-Ponty's theory of visual perception that he defines it in novel and original way, i.e. as a corporeal and not a psychic phenomenon, the consequence of which is that his interpretation of perception differs completely both from Descartes' understanding as well as contemporary dominant psychological theories (for example cognitive or *INFOPRO* theories) that defend perception as a mental event. Instead of subjective explanations or empirical theories Merleau-Ponty presents "ordinary intuitive point of view from which we understand ourselves as neither disembodied intellects nor physical mechanisms, but living bodily subjects."³ Merleau-Ponty highlights the importance of pre-reflexive sensual experience that is older than thinking, once again with such belief representing a continuation in his philosophical thought all the way to *The Visible and the Invisible*.

In his criticism of empiricism (that regards the world as an object while the subject is regarded as yet another object among many) and intellectualism (that defends absolute subjectivism) Merleau-Ponty argues that it would be necessary to highlight direct experience of things in which

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Struktura ponašanja*, Beograd, Nolit, 1984, 297–298.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston, Ill, Northwestern University Press, 1968, 134.

³ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, London, Routledge, 2008, 132.

things reach beyond sensual manifestations and are not only the result of our judgments about individual units and their comparisons.⁴ In his opinion in experience as revealed by pure description, we meet natural, organic and mental events that mutually explain each other.

In his ontological discussion of perception the connection between the sensually given and meaning became important. According to the traditional interpretation the disturbances in perception are nothing more than sensual deficiencies, while, as Merleau-Ponty argued clinical cases show that difficulties arise from the lack of connection between sensual perception and meaning. In spite of their injuries patients retained numerous motor abilities and were able to think abstractly, but they lost the intermediate intuitive, motor intentional sense of spatial orientation. A related problem is represented by the so-called *phantom limbs* which neither physiology nor psychology was able to clarify, something that was accomplished only by the holistic phenomenological approach.

Merleau-Ponty saw a promising solution to the problem of perception in *Gestalt* theory which instead of foregrounding the idea of meaning highlighted the idea of structure which Merleau-Ponty described as a “indiscernible joint of an idea and of a substance, a contingent event on the basis of which contents in front of us start to acquire a meaning, an intelligibility in the process of becoming”⁵. By stressing the *structure* as the fundamental reality, Merleau-Ponty already in his book *The Structure of Behavior* dealt with the issue of the soul and the body as well as the notion of *Gestalt* of which he wrote: “Nature is, we say, the outside of a concept. Precisely the concept as a concept possesses no outside and we are left with the understanding of *Gestalt* as the unity of the outside, the nature and the idea. In a similar vein the consciousness too, for which the *Gestalt* exists, was not an intellectual consciousness but perceptual experience.”⁶ It is thus not surprising that precisely perceptual consciousness is in the opinion of Merleau-Ponty the realm that warrants a more detailed research.

The most important contribution of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) is its ontological description of perception which transcends subjective experience or objective property of the mind. In his view perception is always “immanent because the object that we see cannot be foreign to us since vision is always possessed by us, and transcendent because there is always more in a perception than is actually given”⁷. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy thus leans neither toward psychology nor epistemology but toward *ontology*, for like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty believed that “an ontology of human existence must proceed from a phenomenological description of human experience”⁸.

Theory of visual perception in Merleau-Ponty rests upon the concept of the corporeal schema, which means that it is a form of intentionality with which motor intentionality is concerned. Carman Taylor claims: “Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is neither an empirical theory of sensory mechanisms nor the logical analysis of our concepts pertaining to perception, but instead a concrete description of what perception itself is, namely the phenomenal and motor aspect of our bodily being in the world.”⁹

For Merleau-Ponty all the senses cannot be equated in the sense of an equal susceptibility to objectivity and intentionality for the very experience does not offer them as equal. In his opinion, the visual experience is the most important for it is more reliable than the tactile one. The visual

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Struktura ponašanja...*, op. cit. 300.

⁵ Ibid. 324.

⁶ Ibid. 329.

⁷ Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2005, 36.

⁸ Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty...*, op. cit. 74.

⁹ Ibid. 43.

experience “garners within itself its own truth and adds to it, because its richer structure offers me modalities of being unsuspected by touch”¹⁰. He claims that the unity of the gaze through two eyes is created because the body is not the sum of organs but a “synergic system, all the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world, in so far as it is the congealed face of existence”¹¹.

Although the visual experience possesses the most important role we should not forget that experience too begins with the aid of other senses, especially touch. “The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing.”¹² Without other sensual experiences the visual experience too would not be what it is, for the overlapping of senses is an essential property of our experience. It is worth noting Merleau-Ponty’s statement that the senses translate mutually without any mediator: “Man”, says Herder, “is a permanent *sensorium commune*, who is affected now from one quarter, now from another.”¹³ On such basis Merleau-Ponty could be placed among the defenders of the direct perception which in the sixties started to be developed by J. J. Gibson (1904–1979).

Merleau-Ponty ascribes to visual perception a certain *historical density* and perceptual synthesis which is also temporal synthesis. As we open our eyes and see in front of us a certain object our consciousness is first filled with colors and vague reflections. To the action of the gaze Merleau-Ponty ascribes prospectivity and retrospectivity. The former because our gaze is oriented toward an aim (toward the object) and the latter because the object “will present itself as preceding its own appearance, as the *stimulus*, the motive or the prime mover of every process since its beginning. The spatial synthesis and the synthesis of the object are based on its unfolding of time.”¹⁴

Temporality has a special place in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of visual perception for it involves both vision and movement. Vision is conditioned by the movement of the eyes and the movement of the body and both are conditioned also by time, but in his opinion this does not concern the experience of time but its formation, for my body “takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present”¹⁵. This means that visual perception is a condensation of past perception and the present one, namely that the present perception took for its own the past one. There therefore exists a link between the past and the present perception, something that is obvious in paintings that Merleau-Ponty discusses; it is therefore not surprising that he finds in painting a paradigmatic example of a pre-reflexive visual experience. When we speak of perception we speak of syntheses, as for example in the case of works of fine art that he writes about. We arrive at an analysis with the aid of reflexive thinking and in such a case we raise the question as to “what I am really seeing.”¹⁶ In this way Cézanne’s works which Merleau-Ponty often discusses, on the one hand, offer synthesis reached by the painter, while on the other we, as viewers, undergo an analytical process that leads the painter to the final painting. In Merleau-Ponty’s opinion radical reflection must be concerned with pre-reflexive experience of the world if it wants to understand itself. But what does pre-reflexive experience mean? It is not plurality given by the synthesis of all understanding but “a certain perceptual field against the background of a world”¹⁷. The way that we arrive at the primordial perception which is “non-thetic, pre-objective and pre-

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London–New York, Routledge, 1995, 235.

¹¹ Ibid. 234.

¹² Ibid. 229.

¹³ Ibid. 235.

¹⁴ Ibid. 239.

¹⁵ Ibid. 240.

¹⁶ Ibid. 241.

¹⁷ Idem.

conscious,” is explained in the following paragraph: “Let us therefore say *provisionally* that there is a merely possible stuff of knowledge. From every point of the primordial field intentions move outwards, vacant and yet determinate; in realizing these intentions, analysis will arrive at the object of science, at sensation as a private phenomenon, and at the pure subject which posits both. These three terminal concepts are no nearer than on the horizon of primordial experience. It is in the experience of the thing that the reflective ideal of positing thought shall have its basis. Hence reflection does not itself grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present.”¹⁸

Perception of Depth and Movement

In philosophy and psychology of visual perception as well as in some other disciplines and realms dealing with the visual (such as artificial intelligence) perception of depth represents one of the fundamental questions and remains even today an unsolved riddle for its phenomenal existence is anything but obvious. Through his research into this phenomenon Merleau-Ponty found the essence of perception, for traditional theories (of Berkeley and Descartes, for example) negated its visibility. Radical empiricism attempted to prove the impossibility of seeing depth by focusing on the properties of the retina on which only a two-dimensional image can be drawn. According to the second doctrine, i.e. reflexive analysis, the depth in principle is not visible for it exists for the subject only. Although both doctrines negate the visibility of depth, we know from experience that depth exists. This means that the doctrines do not originate in our actual experience but acquire the position of an observer from the side, equating – according to Merleau-Ponty – depth with width, causing the latter to become invisible. Merleau-Ponty thus once more researched the riddle of the visibility of depth and critically evaluated theories dealing with it for in his view depth was neither a result of seeing the height and width from the side and nor the third dimension, but a key phenomenon of our perception instead and thus rather the first than the third dimension.

It is characteristic for Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of space that he distinguishes between spatialized space (*espace spatialisé*) and spatializing space (*espace spatialisant*). The first applies to physical space which is determined by concrete relations (below and above, left and right, close and distant) and which appears to us as an *unsolvable multiplicity* while the second applies to geometric space with its changeable dimensions. Space as discussed by Merleau-Ponty is neither real nor logical environment wherein things would be positioned, but oriented phenomenal space or means with which a certain position of things is made possible.

One of the main reasons for Merleau-Ponty’s interest in space is his wish to get with its aid closer to the new concept of intentionality, for “the classical conception, which treats the experience of the world as a pure act of constituting consciousness, manages to do so only in so far as it defines consciousness as absolute non-being, and correspondingly consigns its contents to a *hylectic layer* which belongs to opaque being”¹⁹. His discussion of space highlights the perception of depth, for in his opinion it is depth that directly reveals the link between the subject and space. Depth “forces us to reject the preconceived notion of the world and rediscover the primordial experience from which it springs: it is, so to speak, the most *existential* of all dimensions, because (and here Berkeley’s argument is right) it is not impressed upon the object itself, it quite clearly

¹⁸ Ibid. 242.

¹⁹ Ibid. 243.

belongs to the perspective and not to things. Therefore it cannot either be extracted from, or even put into that perspective by consciousness. It announces a certain indissoluble link between things and myself by which I am placed in front of them, whereas breadth can, at first sight, pass for a relationship between things themselves, in which the perceiving subject is not implied.²⁰

Merleau-Ponty states that we usually interpret depth as a creation of reason while he regards it as a form of organization in our body. The first interpretation is relevant due to the phenomenon of illusions. We thus see the illusion of depth when, for example, looking through a stereoscope our eyes adjust to a certain degree of convergence, although in reality there is no actual depth. But if we assume “that it is not possible to see what is not there”²¹, thereby remaining on the level of defining visual perception with a sensible impression. Merleau-Ponty argues that the dispersion of images on the retina triggers the convergence does not exist by itself. Dispersion, claims Merleau-Ponty, exists only for the subject that attempts to unite monocular phenomena of the same structure and who strives to synergy. Consequently, in his opinion, the depth is here from the moment when monocular images appear dispersed. Such phenomenon shows us how the unity of binocular viewing and of depth that is connected to it is possible.

The understanding of depth as a form of certain organization in our body appeared in Merleau-Ponty’s writings also under the influence of *Gestalt* psychologists who, when discovering that the apparent size and convergence are not present in perception itself as objective facts, distanced themselves from psychology and aided themselves with a phenomenological description that shows us the depth exterior to any geometry.

Merleau-Ponty comprehensively illustrates the phenomenon of depth with a cube, i.e. with sketches of the cube, comparing the empiricist position with the intellectualist one, arguing that neither one nor the other offer a satisfactory answer to the question what it means to see a cube. According to the empiricist interpretation the actual appearance of sketches is united by a series of other appearances (as if seen from different sides simultaneously), while intellectualism defends the meaning of mental representation of the cube as a geometric body. Merleau-Ponty found the solution for a better understanding of the visibility of the cube in an act “which corrects the appearances, giving to the acute or obtuse angles the value of right angles, to the distorted sides the value of a square, is not the idea of the geometrical relations of equality, and the geometrical mode of being to which they belong—it is the investing of the object by my gaze which penetrates and animates it, and shows up immediately the lateral faces as *squares seen askew*, to the extent that we do not even see them in their diamond-shaped, perspective aspect”²². In Merleau-Ponty’s opinion the act that forms the originality of depth is the parallel presence of two experiences that in spite of their difference are mutually inclusive. Depth is therefore—in contradistinction to width and height in which the elements are parallel—a dimension in which “elements of things envelop each other”²³. Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of depth is distinctively an existential one, for the perception of depth is presented as a subjective birth or intertwining with the world. This is especially pronounced in painting (or at least in painterly works of artists that he researched) for in his belief it celebrates depth.

Merleau-Ponty also dealt with the question of objectivity of forms and size and in this task first studied perceptual constants (size, shape and color). Relying on Kant he distinguished between appearance of the world and the world as a strictly connected system. He thus claimed that

²⁰ Ibid. 257.

²¹ Ibid. 262.

²² Ibid. 264.

²³ Idem.

we are not prisoners of appearance and that “the object alone is able fully to appear”²⁴. In his opinion reality is not “a crucial appearance underlying the rest, it is the framework of relations with which all appearances tally”²⁵. In this way a cube in spite of its perspectival deformities remains a cube for perspectival deformation is not a simple given. Individual appearances of the cube form the meaning of the perceived and are placed in a rigorous system. The perception of the cube reveals that our perception is not passive for it includes the understanding and the meaning of perspectival deformations.

In Merleau-Ponty the question of the existence of correct, objective and real sizes and shapes is transformed into the question of forms in general. Certain shapes and certain spatial configurations in his opinion exist “because our body as a point of view upon things, and things as abstract elements of one single world, form a system in which each moment is immediately expressive of every other”²⁶. He also discusses color and argues that physics and psychology do not offer a satisfactory definition of color for they focus on a single manner of its appearance, thereby hiding others. In psychological experiments two ways of appearance of color were initially discussed: flat colors (*Flächenfarben*) and surface colors (*Oberflächenfarbe*), the color of paper, for example. Later colors of transparent bodies were added that represent the three dimensions of space (*Raumfarbe*) – gloss (*Glanz*), glow (*Glühen*), brightness (*Leuchten*) and the color of lighting.²⁷

In painting it is the color that gives to, or takes from, the painterly space the depth no matter what its previous drawing basis, for colors have spatial properties which is why some of them appear closer and others more distant. Moreover, we can ascribe to the color configurations also the ability of movement which although not in the domain of painting, it is nonetheless successfully replaced with what Merleau-Ponty names vibration and shine.

Movement is one of the basic properties of our visual apparatus or system. We possess eyes that are dynamic and it is precisely their movability that allows us to see. Beside we can move our head, thereby strengthening movement and also the complete body, all of this additionally contributing to our perception of the visual world.

The early Merleau-Ponty defines movement as “a displacement or change of position,”²⁸ although he at the same time says that in this way we cannot really define it. Here, too, we must, just like in the case of research into space and depth, first search for pre-objective experience of movement that remains beneath objective thinking, for it is what makes sense of movement and “is a variation of the subject’s hold on the world”²⁹.

When discussing movement, Merleau-Ponty researches and compares views of psychologists and logicians and concludes that both are partly correct. In his view the logician is correct “when he demands some constitution of the *dynamic phenomenon* itself, and a description of movement in terms of the moving object which we follow through its course—but he is wrong when he presents the identity of the object in motion as an express identity”³⁰. The psychologist who researches phenomena in detail too must include the moving body in spite of himself in the movement, but his advantage is that he conceives of this body in concrete terms. Merleau-Ponty notes approvingly the opinion of the *Gestalt* theorist Wertheimer in his famous experimental study who claimed that “the perception of movement is not secondary to the perception of the moving object, that we have not

²⁴ Ibid. 301.

²⁵ Ibid. 300.

²⁶ Ibid. 301.

²⁷ Cf. Milan Butina, *Slikarsko mišljenje*, Ljubljana, Cankarjeva založba, 1995, 74–79, 84–92.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception...*, op. cit. 267.

²⁹ Idem.

³⁰ Ibid. 272.

a perception of the latter here, then there, followed by an identification linking these positions in a succession, that their diversity is not subsumed under any transcendent unity, and that in short the identity of the object in motion follows directly from *experience*³¹.

Merleau-Ponty claims that in every movement exists if not a moving body then at least something that moves. This should not be confused with the static form, i.e. form that emerges in a certain point of passage when we stop the movement. While the logician who in principle knows the thetic consciousness only, speaks of movement in itself and presents the problem of movement with the notions of being that leads him to the unsolvability of the problem, Merleau-Ponty describes the difference between the moving body as an object of an “undefined series of explicit and sensations” and “something moving” as a difference between properties that he ascribes to perception while the style he ascribes to “something movable.”

The discussion of movement as a structural phenomenon is in Merleau-Ponty comparable to Leibniz’s discussion of the same subject for Leibniz argued that a person on a moving ship can see the shore as it slides by or feels how it is the ship that is moving (in which case the shore is static). Merleau-Ponty believes that this does not yet show the *relationality* of movement for the special relation that is constitutive of movement, is not among objects. Our perception of movement changes according to what we focus on. If we sit on a train that stands in a station and another train passes it, it appears to us that the train in which we are sitting is moving but only if we look at the second train and vice versa. Merleau-Ponty concludes that what in one part of the visual field gives movable feature, and the value of its support to the second, is the way in which with our gaze we establish our relations with the two of them.

Movement is not important only for visual experience (the movement of the eyes is necessary for looking) but also for tactile experience which is in fact also a part of visual experience for the senses directly complement each other. Touch is thus the same as lighting is for sight, i.e. its precondition. Of importance is also time, which is, like movement, “not only an objective condition of knowing touch, but a phenomenal component of tactile data”³², while the hand represents “an outer brain of man”³³. Similar to the way a searching gaze throws us from our body, is the way this is done by the “knowing touch”³⁴ Of special significance is Merleau-Ponty’s observation that the touching hand and the touched one have different functions—the first that is passive, has the function of the object, while the moving one (i.e. the cognizant) has the function of the subject. He persuasively points out a conception of the body that is simultaneously object and subject.

In Merleau-Ponty’s opinion some visible or tactile thing is neither a notion nor consciousness about a certain objective property, but that which we capture by our gaze or movement, for the object “which presents itself to the gaze or the touch arouses a certain motor intention which aims not at the movements of one’s own body, but at the thing itself from which they are, as it were, suspended”³⁵.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty took on the daunting task to describe our complete experience of space that is linked to movement and sight. He thus discussed not only spatial relations among objects and their geometric characteristics which represent more abstract functions, but also attempted to show “the establishment of the subject in a setting, and finally

³¹ Idem.

³² Ibid. 315.

³³ Cit. cit. Ibid. 316.

³⁴ Cit. cit. Ibid. 315.

³⁵ Ibid. 317.

his inherence in a world”³⁶. At the same time he showed that “spatial perception is a spatial phenomenon and is comprehensible only within a perceptual field which contributes in its entirety to motivating the spatial perception by suggesting a possible anchorage”³⁷.

Merleau-Ponty concludes his treatise on the contact between the object and the body with the observation that every “contact of an object with part of our objective body is ... in reality a contact with the whole of the present or possible phenomenal body. That is how the constancy of the tactile object may come about through its various manifestations. It is a constancy-for-my-body, an invariant of its total behavior. The body is borne towards tactile experience by all its surfaces and all its organs simultaneously, and carries with it a certain typical structure of the tactile *world*.”³⁸

Merleau-Ponty also reminds us of the unity of sensible experiences that reveals itself in verbal expression (for example in rhetorical figures such as the “fire” of passion, the “light” of the spirit, etc.) and in artworks. He especially highlights Cézanne and his belief that a picture contains even the smell of the environment, whereby the latter attempted to say that a certain thing would not possess a certain color if it didn’t possess a certain shape, tactile given, sonority, smell and that a thing is an absolute fullness projected by my undivisible existence.

Our perception is pronouncedly spatial, but at the same time also temporal. The observed thing (a certain place, some street or a cube) will after we would cease to observe it, pass into a latent state, for what we once saw is always here, is always a part of what we look, or, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “elsewhere is always something we have seen or might see; and even if I do perceive it as simultaneous with the present, this is because it is part of the same wave of duration.”³⁹ This means that for example, perspectival gazes that are successive, or binocular gazes we do not compose from two monocular gazes. Perspectives *pass* one into another and here too we speak of synthesis, of “synthesis of passage,” to be more precise. Our actual gaze is not limited to that which is offered by the current visual field but is intertwined with past experiences which is why we can imagine things that are in immediate proximity (for example the neighboring space, the back side of an object, countryside behind the hill or the inside of a jar) but which we do not see at the moment. Merleau-Ponty explains: “My point of view is for me not so much a limitation of my experience as a way I have of infiltrating into the world in its entirety. When I see the horizon, it does not make me *think* of that other landscape which I should see if I were standing on it; nor does that other landscape make me think of a third one and so on; I do not *visualize* anything; all these landscapes are already there in the harmonious sequence and infinite unfolding of their perspectives.”⁴⁰

Visual perception as interpreted by Merleau-Ponty differs extensively from functional relations between the viewer and the object (or the world) that in his opinion are engendered by physics. Perception also is not something that would constitute our consciousness, but is the corporeal phenomenon, for in his opinion “*I have* the world as an incomplete individual, through the agency of my body as the potentiality of this world, and I have the positing of objects through that of my body, or conversely the positing of my body through that of objects.”⁴¹ Since the eye isn’t mind but a material organ, the question how the eye can be conscious of anything is warranted. Here too, Merleau-Ponty has a ready answer, for he claims that this can occur only if together with the objective body we also introduce the phenomenal body, if as the subject of sensation instead of consciousness we posit existence or being in the world through the body.

³⁶ Ibid. 280.

³⁷ Idem.

³⁸ Ibid. 17.

³⁹ Ibid. 329.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 329–330.

⁴¹ Ibid. 350.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological discussion of visual perception was obviously pronouncedly ontological and existential—just as his discussion of painting. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty described phenomenal body with the notion of a body schema and this one with the unity of the body and the unity of senses. But the latter does not signify that all the senses carry the same meaning; it is obvious that vision was not by coincidence in the center of his analysis for he ascribed it central significance. It is therefore not surprising that it was precisely painting, which is in the domain of the visual, in which he found a paradigm of our pre-reflexive experience.

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Moris Merlo-Ponti: Vizuelna percepcija kao telesni fenomen

Apstrakt: U prevazilaženju kartezijanske dualističke koncepcije vizuelne percepcije, Moris Merlo-Ponti razmatra vizuelnu percepciju u različitim ontološkim i egzistencijalnim pojmovima. On dolazi do ovakvog pristupa kritičkim istraživanjem empirističkih i intelektualističkih teorija, koje on prevazilazi uz pomoć fenomenoloških i *gestalt* pristupa. Vizuelnu percepciju ne sagledava više kao psihički, već kao *telesni* fenomen. Iz ovoga sledi da, prema njegovim objašnjenjima, dubina i kretanje zadržavaju svoj značaj, budući da ih ne interpretira više u smislu čina (aktivnosti) svesti već – pod uticajem *gestalt* teorije – organizacija u našem telu. Ovo podrazumeva da umesto mišljenja koje postavlja kartezijanizam, kao odliku koju dele savremene kognitivne teorije, Merlo-Ponti ističe uslov pre-refleksivnog iskustva.

Ključne reči: Moris Merlo-Ponti, vizuelna percepcija, fenomenologija percepcije, prostor, dubina, kretanje