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# SENSES IN VISUAL ARTS AS A PRISM FOR PHILOSOPHY AND THROUGH THE PRISM OF PHILOSOPHY

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how a sensory approach to visual arts can be relevant for philosophy and how this prism, once brought to philosophy, can give insights on art in return. I will try to demonstrate that the difference between modernity's two main schools of thought (namely, materialism and idealism) can be understood – thanks to the model of painting as an allegory of the world – as an exclusive preference for one sense: touch for materialism and sight for idealism. Much as the two schools differ, both consider the painting (or the world) a finite picture, whose elements can be juxtaposed in a single homogeneous plane of knowledge devoid of any opacity. This leads to separate both vision and the mind from the body and from the world. As a result, sight and touch end up dissociated. That is why, to challenge this modern paradigm and renew with a holistic relationship to the world and to ourselves, philosophers and artists propose a shift towards a synaesthetic approach to painting. Such an approach will uncover a modality of being where the body, the subject, and the world, as well as sight and touch, can be reunited. Thus, I will show that Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh – that echoes through the paintings of artists who attempt to break free from the frame and engage the observer with all his senses and being, such as Raclawice Panorama, Malevich, El Lissitzky, Cézanne or the Navajos' sand paintings – can offer, thanks to a synaesthetic approach, both a new framework for philosophy and a new understanding of visual arts.

## Keywords:

senses/synaesthesia, painting, body, ontology, epistemology, metaphysics, flesh



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*Every theory of painting is a metaphysics*  
(Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 361)

There is a reciprocity and a constant dialogue between philosophy and painting; it is a mutual relation. Sometimes, paintings can contest philosophy, suggest changes, experiment on the limits of the traditional framework and thus give the impetus for a philosophical renewal. Conversely, philosophy can feed the arts with either criticisms or new perspectives. On some occasions, paintings and philosophy can also become an echo of one another, expressing a common attitude or relation to the world (even if they are not strictly contemporary).

This situation could perfectly describe the relationship between modern philosophy and the paintings of the Quattrocento, those famous paintings from the Renaissance that use geometrical perspective to try to recreate depth within the painting. There is an interesting philosophical turning point at stake here. Indeed, since these pictures can provide an impression of depth while being a flat surface, it could mean that depth itself is a sensory illusion constituted by the subject. If so, then the objects could be purified from any impression of relief and juxtaposed in a single plane. In this way, the world of objects could be conceived similarly to a painting on a wall, existing objectively on one sole surface but creating false images of distance, depth and thickness. Thereby, in this framework, if I cannot see the back of a chair, this is solely due to my subjectivity and its incarnated and situated character. This gap is attributed to me, not to the things. Someone positioned elsewhere could see the back of the chair, and an absolute observer – who doesn't participate in the world like the finite beings we are – would be able to juxtapose the whole of the world on a flat surface like a painting.

Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, adopts this kind of thinking, and his choice is implicitly based on Quattrocento's demonstration that depth can be artificially constructed. This distinction between a visible and a tangible reality can be found in his *Optics*' sixth discourse, where he writes: „it is the soul which sees, and not the eye” (1985, vol. 1, p. 172). What is implied in this extract is that, while the eye occupies a definite place in the world of objects, the soul can be wrong in its judgements and give rise to a false visible world. This crucial quote shows that this idea of an ontological separation between sight and touch is but another expression of Descartes' substantial dualism established in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, that his successors emphasised and radicalised into two distinct schools of thought: materialism and idealism. This shows that a certain type of painting can give rise to a new metaphysics. Nevertheless, I would like to go even further than the introductory quoted statement of Merleau-Ponty and explore the proposition that every *sensory approach* to painting contains a metaphysics and an ontology. The aim of this paper is to show how the prism of senses in visual arts (especially in painting) can provide an interpretive

framework for modern philosophy, helping us to uncover some of its prejudices. This prism will also offer insights into an alternative philosophical movement, already adopted by some artists and philosophers, that could overcome these biases. I will start with the study of materialism and idealism, trying to show how those two sides of modernity, beneath the surface of their apparent opposition, agree on dissociating the senses (even though they have never explicitly formulated this thesis). Thus, they each adopt an exclusive sense and raise it to the status of archetypal relation to the world. This is how materialism ended up focusing solely on touch, while idealism chose sight. After examining the philosophical consequences of the senses' separation, I want to propose an alternative to dualism altogether thanks to a synaesthetic approach to the world and to paintings. In such an approach, our senses are not strictly separated and excluded from one another anymore. Instead, they are always primordially united before any artificial distinction. Thereby, by the end of this study, the prism of senses in visual arts will be proven relevant in philosophy, as it can develop both a diagnosis and a solution for an ontological problem in the history of philosophy.

To be fair, Merleau-Ponty also contemplated a sensory approach since he interpreted Descartes' philosophy according to the prism of senses in the following passage:

The blind, says Descartes, *sees with their hands*. The Cartesian model of vision is fashioned after the sense of touch (2007, p. 360).

This statement is particularly true for the materialistic side of dualism, that only posits objects. This position might as well be called atomism since it claims that the world can be decomposed into simple and mutually exclusive elements, parts or figures. In this way, the world comes down to the sum of all these parts. Moreover, this sum is nothing more than all its components. If materialists really had to distinguish the world from all the objects it encompasses, then they would probably consider it as the homogeneous plane on which all the elements are arranged. Thereby, the materialist's world could be, at most, the white canvas on which everything takes place, and as such it would be exactly like Newton's absolute space. In the materialistic framework, vision amounts to almost nothing and only touch can be ontologically adequate. That is indeed the case since materialists acknowledge solely the existence of atoms and their movements, acting on our nerves, and for "there need be no resemblance between the ideas which the soul conceives and the movements which cause these ideas" (Descartes, 1985, vol. 1, p. 167). Such statement from Descartes justifies any attempt to distinguish qualities into two different kinds, like Locke's famous distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Overall, those distinctions most often overlap with a dichotomy between sight and touch. Thus, Descartes attributes the qualities inherent to vision like colour, brightness, intensity,

perspective... to the subject, while the primary qualities inherent to touch like shape, solidity, extension, movement... belong to the objects. Furthermore, only the latter qualities are regarded as true and real, whereas the former are deemed mere ideas cut off from the natural world. Thenceforth, there cannot be any real vision of anything in the materialistic framework since representation itself is considered as an internal and collateral effect of the mechanical movements caused by objective entities. This hypothesis is supported once again by the Quattrocento's paintings because, in Descartes' own words, "these pictures usually contain only ovals and rhombuses when they make us see circles and squares" (Descartes, 1985, vol. 1, p. 172).

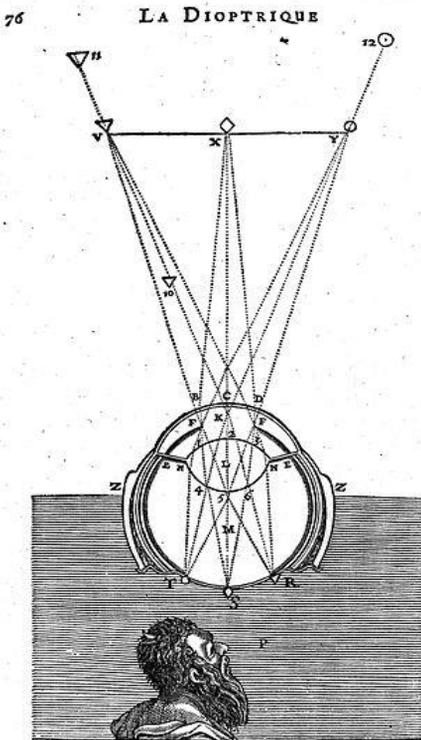


Fig. 1. *Diagram of Ocular Refraction*, woodcut from *La Dioptrique* [Optics] by René Descartes. In Descartes (1637), *Discours de la methode pour bien conduire sa raison, & chercher la verité dans les sciences: plus la dioptrique, les meteores, et la geometrie, qui sont des essais de cete methode*. Lejda: Jan Maire, p. 76.

Photo source: Wellcome Library, London  
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Indeed, the artist needs to draw a rhombus if he wants the observer to see a square in depth. Hence, the objective figure that is truly present on the canvas is a rhombus, while the figure that we see and that is represented to the subject is a square. The example of such duplicity leads Descartes and Locke to trust only what can be measured geometrically (such as the objective surface of the painting), whereas the rest – namely, the visual aspects – will be reduced to a product of the mind. This hierarchy delineated between the visual and touchable aspects of the painting explains why the whole visual space which we see in perspective

is a lie or an error according to them. They only acknowledge the objective and material existence of the flat surface where the painting's elements can be juxtaposed. To understand what this painting allegory means in the case of materialism, one could imagine a world consisting of a juxtaposed chain of atoms, devoid of any colour or sensible quality in general, except for the materiality or distance that follows from their juxtaposition. Only the atoms' spatial existence is true, while the rest is but an illusion that our inventive soul created, set off by a movement of atoms reaching our nerves. In such a framework, light itself is not a kind of telepathy, it doesn't allow a vision of sensible entities from a distance, but it must be conceived "as an action by contact – not unlike the action of things upon the blind man's cane" (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 360). According to a materialist, light is a movement of matter that physically hits one's retina, thus starting a whole causal chain of real movements that, fortuitously, provides a sensation as a side effect. Nevertheless, that collateral representation doesn't look like anything from this causal chain, which is the only reality in this paradigm. As Bergson wrote,

atomistic realism, which puts the movements in space and the sensations in the consciousness, cannot ever discover that the extension's modifications (or phenomena) and the sensations responding to them have something to do with one another. [...] They don't reflect the image of their causes (Bergson, 2012, p. 239, translated by the author).

Indeed, since they are separated by a substantial distinction, the sensations cannot be the picture of an object: their modality of existence is radically different, and the object is devoid of any visual qualities, it is only manifested in a purely spatial existence that our representation or vision cannot ever reach. Moreover, there cannot be any subject or observer in such a mechanical interpretation of the world; we are all simply objective parts of this reality. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

I might consider myself in the midst of the world, inserted into it through my body, which would allow itself to be invested with relations of causality. In this case, "the senses" and "the body" are material mechanisms and know nothing at all" (2012, p. 246).

To carry on with the painting allegory, I could say that we are a bunch of atoms within the painting, lacking the distance that would enable us to see anything; we are the plaything of atoms' movements and causal relations, trapped inside the painting. Thus, in materialism, there are only blind contacts and movements of matter, whereas seeing amounts to a subjective internal illusion. There is no spectator for the objective painting of the world that simply unfolds and takes place "in itself", exhausted by its parts' juxtaposition.

Therefore, the materialist acknowledges that he is a part of the painting, but he closes the painting on itself, sealed within the frame, and the materialist himself is entirely comprised within the painting's flat surface. Indeed, his being has nothing to do with the being of our experience, our perception or the spectator: he exists solely through touch (the contact of particles with one another) and through the materiality of the painting itself. On the contrary, an idealist – who represents the other side of modern philosophy and its dualism – would agree that there is a spectator and that there is a vision of the painting. However, he could say so only insofar as the mind or consciousness that sees the world is cut off from it, is outside of it and contemplates it from afar with an overarching gaze. Thus, to gain vision and subjectivity, the idealist must lose his body, his materiality, his naturalness, his external self and more radically lose all participation and contact with the natural world. This is how the idealist loses touch and becomes a floating spirit – universal, with no situation – who can see the world not thanks to being a part of it (on the contrary, he doesn't belong to it anymore), but rather because he actively constitutes it himself. Therefore, there is no density nor facticity but only an isolated vision in the idealist's framework. The world is not considered as an autonomous existence anymore, but as an idea constituted and projected by the mind of the absolute subject.

Such hypothesis – already wholly implied in Descartes' hyperbolic doubt and in the fact that he establishes the mind as the *res cogitans*: a radically different substance than the *res extensa* – will be better expressed by the more recent concept of “transcendental ego”. Nonetheless, if we temporarily set aside the question of the substance of the world or painting (whether it is thought or matter), we notice that the modality of being used by both sides of modernity is quite similar. Indeed, in both cases there is the presupposition that the existence of the world must be objective, fully positive, transparent, exhaustive and juxtaposable in one glance with no secrets nor hidden aspects for the one who knows it adequately. The reason of such presupposition is evident in the idealist's case: how could the world not be clear, positive, and knowable (at least to me) if I constituted it myself? Then, in this clear world, one may distinguish as many mutually exclusive entities as he sees fit. In this way, the idealist also perceives a world of objects. However, and in opposition to the materialists, those objects are distinguished and constituted by the mind that sees, through subjective and maybe a priori forms, categories and laws of association. The fact that the world is perceived through subjective a priori operations (according to Kant) means that this perception doesn't depend on our body nor on the features it acquired through evolution (Kant, 1997). Hence, our situation and even the particular aspects of this existing world are not relevant to the idealist because his a priori conditions are far broader than the specific ones of our world: they are valid for any possible experience, even radically different ones. Thanks to them, the idealist can claim that vision's possibility is not rooted in our body nor

in the world but is independent of both. This claim from idealism has been brought to fever pitch by Sartre, most notably with his conception of the subjectivity or consciousness as a nothingness [néant]. To put it into Sartre's own words: "The For-itself, in fact, is nothing but the pure nihilation of the In-itself, it is like a hole in being at the heart of Being" (2003, p. 637). This quote shows that, according to Sartre, only Being (the In-itself) truly exists, and the subject (or For-itself) exists solely as a hole within Being. Thus, in this paradigm, the mind sees the objects and the world in themselves, but only insofar as it doesn't partake in them. The mind is a hole or void that can receive images of the things precisely because it is itself nothing at all. Therefore, vision in Sartre's idealistic framework is not only independent of the world, but it even seems to require to be absent from it – radically situated outside of it, at an insurmountable ontological distance, nowhere or on another plane of existence – if it wants to be efficient and possible at all. Thus, the idealistic subject can see but doesn't partake himself in what is to be seen. Hence, on one hand, with materialism the world is conceived as it should be for an absolute observer, but we don't see it ourselves, we are simply a blind part in this painting of the world, while, on the other hand, idealism claims that we are in this absolute position, with a capacity to see everything at once, but we don't participate at all in the world anymore, at least not in our most essential part: our mind that sees, knows and constitutes everything. Merleau-Ponty summarises this opposition in his *Phenomenology of Perception* perfectly, showing that neither of the two options is satisfying enough:

If we attempted to follow realism [or materialism in our prism – C. H.] in turning the perception into coinciding with the thing, then we could no longer even understand the nature of the perceptual event, how the subject can assimilate the thing, or how the subject can carry the object into his history after having coincided with it, for in realism, the subject necessarily possesses nothing of the object. We must live things in order to perceive them. And yet we also reject the idealism of synthesis because it distorts our lived relation with things. If the perceiving subject accomplishes the synthesis of the perceived, he must dominate and think a material of perception, he must himself organize and unite all of the appearances of the thing; that is, perception must lose its inherence in an individual subject and in a point of view, and the thing must lose its transcendence and its opacity. To live a thing is neither to coincide with it, nor to think it straight through (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 340).

Therefore, within the framework of modern philosophy, either I am in the painting (or in the world), and I cannot see it – because I deny the existence and validity of the mind and its sensations, which are considered as a purely subjective addition, a collateral effect following from the objective processes – or I am a floating spirit and can see but only my own representation, namely

(how and) what I constitute myself. In this second case, there are only ideas, nothing possesses the degree of reality that can be found in the materialistic framework because my spirit and my ideas are independent of my body, of the senses and of the world; their externality or objectivity can only be granted by me, and thus these ideas remain subjective. This is how Descartes' substantial dualism ultimately leads to choose either the body (the object, the matter) or the mind (the subject, the ideas) and touch or sight, but cannot hold both together at once. Keeping in mind that Quattrocento's paintings are one of the crucial experiences that served as a basis for Descartes' philosophy, we can now interpret anew Panofsky's quote affirming that "the history of perspective [...] is as much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self" (Panofsky, 1997, pp. 67–68). In fact, it is precisely because modern philosophy is unable to follow those two directions at the same time, that it developed into two distinct schools of thought, each favouring a certain aspect: the object, the contact, the tangible with materialism or the subject, the distance and vision with idealism.

Now that modern philosophy's situation is exposed, let's examine what prejudices led to this problematic choice. If our starting hypothesis – namely, that a sensory approach can be a relevant prism for metaphysics and ontology – is true, it would mean that one prejudice to be found at the source of these problems is the dissociation between the senses, and more precisely the exclusion of touch and sight from each other. Another important prejudice though is the presupposition that nature – namely, the world and the things: the *res extensa* – exists solely on the modality of being of the object, as positive parts that can be infinitely divided and juxtaposed. I even think that the former stems from the latter; the dissociation of the senses comes after accepting the ontology of the object, but it is this sensory dissociation that enacts the decisive split leading to substantial dualism. This ontology has been strongly promoted by modern science, which is why Merleau-Ponty can assert that "scientific knowledge displaces experience and [that] we have unlearned seeing, hearing, and sensing in general in order to deduce what we ought to see, hear, or sense from our bodily organization and from the world as it is conceived by the physicist" (2012, p. 238). Indeed, a scientific experiment such as a dissection for example teaches me that my body can be decomposed into parts, so it shows me that the body is an object. However, what – in me – can see (i.e., my mind or thoughts) cannot be decomposed in such a way; hence, they are considered independent of the body and partake in another kind of being or reality altogether. Since vision cannot be observed externally, some deduce that it cannot be decomposed and dissected and it's therefore transmitted to the mind (understood as something positive, a kind of substance, but of another type than the extensive objects), separated from the body. Thus, we start to distinguish between two orders of reality when we start to separate the function "to see"

from the existence and relations of the body, as well as from its tangibility. The separation between vision and tangibility accompanies the separation between the subject and the world (or the objects), which is the foundation of modern philosophy. Nevertheless, such a thought experiment, that leads to positing an external and independent mind, relies on a syllogism because it postulates a vision that would still occur with a dissected body; yet, that poses a problem. Firstly, it's not because I can dissect the body that it isn't the body who sees and feels in our normal experience, and secondly dissection is operated on dead bodies; yet, if ever it was undertaken on a living one, it would end up dying. However, to be alive is a prerequisite to seeing, therefore an experiment that discards the living body also discards any possibility of vision.

Hence, the experiment of dissection doesn't prove the existence of the spirit and of a vision independent of the body, on the contrary, it simply shows that there cannot be any vision without the body. Actually, the line of thought that dissociates vision from the body has a mortified and deconsecrated approach to the body. It doesn't consider the body as a fully living entity, embedded in a complex network of relations with the world, but simply as an inert mass of matter, at best susceptible to be the vehicle of another kind of entity – a spiritual one – for whom the body would be like a tomb or a prison. This view is expressed in Plato's *Cratylus* famous passage (400c):

some people say that the body (sôma) is the tomb (sêma) of the soul [...], with the idea that the soul is being punished for something, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is securely kept (1997, pp. 118–119).

It is because the idealists accept the presupposition that the world is made of parts and that the body is nothing more than its organs that they need to detach what sees from the body, so they posit a positive mind; but because it must be of a different kind of reality, they lose contact with the world, they lose touch, and they lose the sense of true coexistence and community. Thereby, instead of belonging and participating in the world, the idealists suppose an all-powerful autonomous spiritual entity that constitutes the whole of the world that they see. Whence, on the common ground of the postulate of the ontology of the object, we find again the choice between materialism for which there is no vision, no spirit, and idealism according to which the spirit constitutes everything and is either a nothingness (Sartre) or stuck in its own representation (solipsism), staying in either case without any contact with the physical world.

Nonetheless, I would like to propose (alongside Merleau-Ponty) an intermediate way where there can be a spirit and a vision, but that are not nothing nor outside of the world, creating it all (which is quite some hybris). Instead of the idealistic spirit, we could think of the spirit of a body, that can see the world precisely because it belongs to it, is embedded in it. Such earthly spirit would

not see the world exhaustively but perspectively because the world is not in front of us (ready to be juxtaposed and spread on a flat surface), but all around us, thus expressing and taking into account my situation, my body and the opacity that ensures I am dealing with the things themselves and not simply with ideas. It is only through merging the spirit and the body together – by adopting an incarnated conception of the spirit or “what sees” – that we can hope to unite sight and touch.

Nevertheless, how to connect the mind and the body? How to connect the senses? We could say that it is the body that is the subject, and this would be a convincing approach; but if we wish to go further, it's the whole dualism that must be overcome. To do so, we must acknowledge that the perceiving body shares the same flesh as the things and the world. However, the clear-cut distinction between subject and object would be already weakened if my body was both a subject and an object, so let's start with this point. Thus, we need to ask the following question: what is a body? My body is this thing that I see and feel, like any other thing, with this sole difference that it is not only visible and tangible. It can also see and touch. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty showed that “my body is not merely one object among all others, not a complex of qualities among all others. It is an object sensitive to all others” (2012, p. 245). I inhabit my body, not only as a piece of matter but as something that I am and perceive from. Therefore, my body is my situation and “I am in my body, or rather I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 245). Nonetheless, even if my body can see, this doesn't turn it into something detached and completely apart from the rest of the things (unlike the floating mind). Indeed, it is also touchable and visible, and thus shares the same kind of being as the things of the world, and me too I share this modality of being with them insofar as I am my body. Thence, once we acknowledge that it is the body that sees, there is no solipsism problem anymore because the body perceives what is made of the same flesh as it is. Thereby, the fact that the body is itself visible and tangible opens into the community of beings that are visible and tangible too. My body partakes in the sensible world, it “is one of the visibles, able, thanks to a remarkable turnaround, to see them, it which is one of them” (Merleau-Ponty, 2016, p. 176). Since the body is in the world with the things, there is no need for a concept of “representation” in which we could be trapped. In fact, a purely internal representation could only occur to a floating mind because it lacks the connection with the world, touch and contact, as it is incorporeal. The floating mind that sees is situated too far away from the world, but the body as an object or inert mass of matter is too close to the world, stuck in it, devoid of the required distance to be able to perceive anything.

On the contrary, by adopting the conception of a body that is a subject, a body that sees and feels, we come to a “subject” that is close enough to the world to be able to partake in it and be embedded in it, while it is also far

enough from the things to be able to perceive them without exhausting them. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is precisely because the body is the subject and because its vision rests “upon the pre-logical unity of the body schema, [that] the perceptual synthesis no more possesses the secret of its object than it does the secret of one’s own body, and this is why the perceived object always presents itself as transcendent, this is why the synthesis appears to be carried out upon the object itself, in the world, and not within this metaphysical point that is the thinking subject. And herein lies the distinction between the perceptual synthesis and the intellectual synthesis” (2012, p. 241).

In other words, the perceptual synthesis (or vision) is based on the fact that a subject situated in the world can always discover new aspects of the things, see them from another perspective. For they are not all juxtaposed for an uprooted mind to embrace in a single gaze, but they are present all around the body-subject, at a distance from its standpoint and disposed in a true depth that involves all the senses and being of the body-subject. Therefore, if we restore a conception of the body and of the natural things that are not a pure positivity, then the mind doesn’t have to be a pure positivity either: they can be reconciled and coexist in a single plan of reality or as a single mixed “substance”. In this framework, the mind is the “other side” of the body (cf Merleau-Ponty, 2016, the passage titled “Flesh – Spirit”), and shares its situation, history, culture, perspective... Thus, instead of two pure positivities, or a nothingness and a pure positivity – the two choices of dualism – we need to acknowledge that there is only one flesh of the world, one kind of being that we both are a part of (through touch and body, giving rise, when isolated, to the ontology of the object) and see (giving rise, when this function is isolated, to the ontology of the subject); all of it intricately intertwined. As Merleau-Ponty states it,

since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world. It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes – and even more, every displacement of my body – has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them, as, conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space (Merleau-Ponty 2016, in the chapter called *The Intertwining – The Chiasm*, p. 175).

Hence, through our prism of the senses in the visual arts, we can understand the ontological meaning of this statement of Merleau-Ponty that holds sight and touch together: it means it is possible to both perceive something and be a part of its reality. Such a modality of being is not solely falling under the category of the subject or of the object, but is always already beyond this dichotomy. Indeed, I can see, but I am also susceptible to be seen; I am seeable and this entails that I am a part of this world, that I have my own flesh (part of the visible and even part of the tangible) and that there is or can be contact with what I see,

contact from one vertical being to another. Thanks to this conception of a body-subject, that partakes in the same kind of being as what it perceives, it becomes possible to think of a

relationship to Being that unfolds within Being [what Merleau-Ponty also calls Intra-ontology – C.H.] – at bottom, it was what Sartre was looking for. However, since, according to him, the only interior is me and anything else is exterior [even my body seen by someone else, thus becoming an object and threatening my subjectivity], then Being stays unaffected by this decompression that happens within it in Sartre’s philosophy. Instead, it stays a pure positivity, an object, and the For-itself participates in it only through a kind of madness (Merleau-Ponty, 2016, p. 265).

The negativity involved in perception doesn’t have to be interpreted as an irreversible hole in Being, as a nothingness completely detached from it, because it can also be interpreted as a fold or a hollow within Being (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2016, p. 246). The perceiving body’s flesh is such fold according to Merleau-Ponty, which allows a relationship of the subject with the world and with others without reducing them to objects nor being reduced to an object by them. Thus, if I am a body and a part of the world that are not an object, and if I can see but not in an absolute way, with perspective, relief, and depth... then there is no antithesis between touch and sight, there is no need to choose between them because I am already in both, as a seeing body that perceives the things as they are but without exhausting them. It is the strength of Merleau-Ponty to manage to ally sight with touch in philosophy, to affirm that we share the same being and the same world with what we see, with the painting for example, participating together in something greater. This participation doesn’t prevent a vision because what we participate in is the sensible world, the world of experience, the phenomenal world, which is not only made of the primary qualities, but also bears the secondary ones. Certainly, qualities such as colors are linked to my relationship with what I see, to my position in the world and the particularities of my body, but since I am also in the world, we cannot just ignore and abstract my position from my vision. I never have solely the visible nor only the act of seeing but always both together: the visible is seen (or even thought) by someone situated somewhere in it, and the vision always sees something. Merleau-Ponty wrote in a simple but beautiful way: “He, who sees, cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is in [*s’il en est*]” (2016, p. 175). Such statement may seem obvious, nevertheless it is precisely what both materialism and idealism forget when they separate subject and object, mind and body, sight and touch.

Therefore, if we decide to inhabit our body once again (as before the cultural invention of modern dualism and of Quattrocento’s techniques), then it’s not possible to separate and fully isolate sight and touch (and all the other senses) anymore.

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Our approach and perception of anything will be firstly synaesthetic – as Merleau-Ponty states it: “synaesthetic perception is the rule” (2012, p. 238) – because we are part of the same world and of the same kind of being as what we perceive. In a similar fashion, David Le Breton argued that

there are no olfactory, auditive, tactile or gustatory apparatuses that would separately dispense their data, but a convergence between the senses, an intertwining that solicits their common action (2017, p. 55).

Of course, over a second phase or in some extreme cases (for example with blindness) the reflection can focus on what seems to pertain exclusively to one sense; however,

the experience of isolated “senses” takes place only within an abnormal attitude and cannot be useful for the analysis of direct consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 2016, p. 234).

Therefore, there is a solidarity of the senses in the same way as there is a solidarity of my body with itself, with the things and with the world. It is only when one relinquishes this solidarity that autonomous qualities and separate senses can arise. In this way, Merleau-Ponty argued that

the quality, an isolated sensoriality, is produced when I break this total structuration of my vision, when I cease to adhere to my own gaze and, rather than living within vision, interrogate myself about it, when I wish to test out my possibilities, or when I untie the link between my vision and the world or between myself and the world in order to catch it in the act and to describe it (2016, p. 236).

Thus, by highlighting synaesthesia as the principle of perception, Merleau-Ponty avoids dissociating the mind from the body and from the world. Instead, he posits a body-subject or a flesh that is a part of the world and knows holistically, but non exhaustively, other parts of the world (that it knows from within, in time, space and through perspective). Those other parts of the world – namely, the things around us – are perceived and known as Gestalten that radiate a common style, structure or essence (Wesen) in all their sensible aspects. It is precisely such structure that Merleau-Ponty had in mind when he argued that

by opening up to the structure of the thing, the senses communicate among themselves. We see the rigidity and the fragility of the glass and, when it breaks with a crystal-clear sound, this sound is borne by the visible glass. We see the elasticity of steel, the ductility of molten steel, the hardness of the blade in a plane, and the softness of its shavings. The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: the form has a certain relation with their very nature and it speaks to all of our senses at the same time as it speaks to vision (2016, p. 238).

This conception of a synaesthetic structure stands for a new kind of being, and this different ontology proves to be an alternative to the modern and dualist one.

This is how the prism of the senses in visual arts can overcome the substantial dualism in philosophy and all the problems it involves. This new ontology – in which the perceiver belongs to the same world as what is perceived, perceiving in the sensible world itself, as a part of this world and in a synaesthetic community with things – is coined by Merleau-Ponty as the ontology of the flesh. In the same way as the ontology of the object had its correspondence in the arts with the geometrical perspective of the Quattrocento, the ontology of the flesh also resonates with the works of artists who try to engage the observer in all his being and with all his senses. What is important in such a framework is to settle ourselves in the whole of our experience of the world. Only then we can become an integrated part of the experience, that sees with a haptic vision a visual art that is also embedded in the world, rooted in it. That the painting belongs to the same world as the perceiver is expressed by its thickness and a true depth that cannot be reduced to a flat surface. In this manner, the painting is not only what is to be seen, it is not only what is to be touched (to belong to the same world or to be-with), but it is always already both at the same time, in a synaesthetic manner. Merleau-Ponty explains accurately what he means by synaesthesia when he writes that

it makes sense to say that I see sounds or that I hear colors if vision or hearing are not the simple possession of an opaque *quale*, but rather the experience [l'épreuve] of a modality of existence, the synchronization of my body with it (2016, p. 243).

Synaesthesia does not consist in an additive sum of properties or qualities found in different impressions – much as the body is not a sum of organs – but, more originally, it is the expression of a particular being or structure that reveals itself (in its unity) to my body as a whole, and that I perceive from my own situation (with also my history and culture) because we both belong to the same world. When Le Breton's wrote about the perceiving body, he specified that

it is not its eyes that see, its ears that hear or its hands that touch; but [the body-subject] is wholly involved in its presence to the world and, at any moment, its senses blend in its feeling of existence (2017, p. 54).

Thus, a spectator with a synaesthetic approach to painting is not an absolute observer anymore but is a part of the world with other parts all around, with which (s)he can synchronise and establish a meaningful contact that entails a vision, some knowledge and a perception in all of the senses that the body possesses. To talk about parts of the world could sound similar to the materialistic approach, but the materialist actually presupposed an absolute observer as much as the idealist, if not in his picture of the world, then at least implicitly for the

one who thinks or speaks about this objective world made of atoms. The main reason why the materialist's picture of the world was flat, lacking perspective and true depth, was because the world was seen or thought from the outside, as if we didn't take part in it, in the same way as one could observe disinterestedly the world from outer space, which could be likened to the stance of one contemplating a painting on the wall of a museum. Nevertheless, if spreading the visible on a flat surface becomes a synonym to objectifying and losing the contact with the flesh, then how can visual arts defend and express an ontology of the flesh?

In fact, the change from the ontology of the object to the ontology of the flesh is mostly a change of attitude towards the sensations; the perceiver must feel the painting, the world and everything he perceives not as a flat picture inside his mind or in front of him, but as thick and deep entities that surround him, that he cannot exhaust or perceive all at once because he is one of them and inhabits the same sensible world as them. A very good example of this approach is *Raclawice Panorama* (1893–1894), in which the whole room is (involved in) the artistic and aesthetic experience since the observer is situated in the middle of a circular room and the painting surrounds him completely.



Fig. 2. Jan Styka, Wojciech Kossak, Ludwigo Boller et al., *Panorama Raclawicka*, 1893–1894, detail, cycloramic painting, 15 x 114 m. Poland, Wrocław, 11 J. E. Purkyniego St., The National Museum in Wrocław/ The Raclawice Panorama Museum. Photo source: CC0, credit to Ptjackyll

Contemplating this painting feels like being in the world because we can only see a part of it once at a time; if I turn around, I won't be able to see what I was previously looking at, I cannot hold the entire painting within one single look or perspective. This is precisely what provides such depth to it, this painting uses the depth of the world and the perspective of my body (both given through the temporality of my gaze and through the spatiality of the room). On top of that, some elements of scenery have been placed between the painting and the central island on which the spectator stands; and this scenery contains real-looking elements such as trees, grass or a cart that prolong the painting into the world and soften this transition.

Such an experience uses and relies on the body and on its position, it takes into account my roots in the world and capitalises on them instead of trying to conceal them. In this way, perspective plays an important role here, however, the perspective in question is not the Quattrocento's one. Indeed, this perspective is not outside of time nor purely geometrical – in such a way that it could be calculated and extended to the whole of the world at once – but it is experienced by my body because it participates in the very same world as what it sees. My perspective is not simply an accident of vision nor a flaw of perception; on the contrary, it is what makes perception effective as a whole, in a synaesthetic way, because the perspective is due to the fact that me and the thing I perceive are both parts of the same world while not occupying the same place in it. It is precisely perspective that throws me into the whole field of the world, that I perceive laterally, all around me and not simply in front of me. Thereby, thanks to perspective that provides me with a partial vision, I can get to know the world as this infinite field of experience, or as the horizon that holds the promise of future and different perceptions. Therefore, it is perspective that allows a depth that is not anymore a mere visual reconstruction, like the Quattrocento's one, but a depth that involves our whole body and all its senses as a part of the world. Such depth shouldn't occur inside the frame, in a secondary space that has nothing in common with me and exists solely within the painting. Indeed, if the painting presents a second kind of reality, it could justify a substantial dualism all over again because it is precisely to such imaginary and solely visual space that Descartes could oppose the objective, tangible and measurable surface of the painting (with which it participates to the world), thus dissociating anew two spaces, two senses and two substances. Consequently, a depth that puts the beholder in contact with a flesh should occur directly within the world, thus offering to all his or her senses something that happens in – and belongs to – the sensible world. It is such kind of depth that El Lissitzky achieves in his series of paintings *The Prouns*, and especially in the *Prounenraum* (Proun Room, 1923), in which visual art doesn't create its own space, but invades the real world and takes place in the same space as our perceiving body. El Lissitzky bases those works on an interpretation

of Malevich's suprematist *Black Square*, which he considers a milestone marking the end of a long history of painting that used to depict something, using the inside of the frame as another space, an exclusively artistic space that was not related to life except maybe through the meaning of the depiction or by mimesis. What the *Black Square* did, according to El Lissitzky, is to have blocked or closed entirely this internal space of the painting. With this "monochromatic" black surface where there is nothing else to see, the painting entered the real world, the sensible world in which we live our lives, and this was the steppingstone needed in order to open painting to the construction or creation of art, not anymore within itself, but with us, in the world. In Panofsky's words, El Lissitzky was trying to move away from the

older perspective [*i.e.*, the Quattrocento's one, that] is supposed to have "limited space, made it finite, closed it off", conceived of space "according to Euclidean geometry as rigid three-dimensionality" and it is these very bonds which the most recent art has attempted to break (1997, p. 154)

thanks to settling in the world.

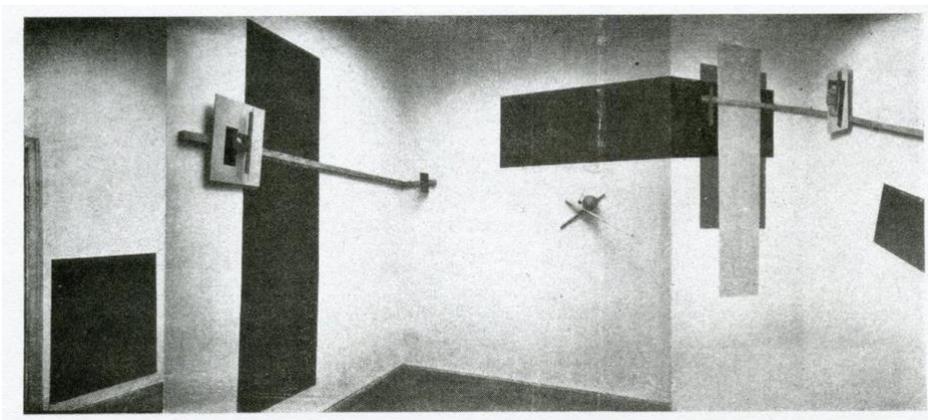


Fig. 3. El Lissitzky, *Prounenraum* [Proun Room], Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung [Great Berlin Art Exhibition] 1923. Reproduced in the avant-garde magazine *G*, No 1, July 1923. Available under fair use at [https://monoskop.org/images/5/5f/G\\_Material\\_zur\\_elementaren\\_Gestaltung\\_1\\_Jul\\_1923.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/5/5f/G_Material_zur_elementaren_Gestaltung_1_Jul_1923.pdf). Photo source: [https://monoskop.org/El\\_Lissitzky](https://monoskop.org/El_Lissitzky)

Therefore, the experience in the Proun Room is not solely visual anymore, as it doesn't rely on artificial impression of depth constructed within the painting with help of geometry, but it takes its thickness from the flesh of the world. In this way, if Descartes came with a ruler to measure the dimensions of an element of the wall of the Proun Room, he wouldn't be able to oppose it to any contrasting visual impression; in this case what we see is the same as what we touch

and measure because the painting takes place in the sensible world itself, we see in the world instead of within a painting. Thus, by borrowing the flesh from the world, a work of art can communicate with all my senses and all my being. Moreover, since it opens itself to my spatial exploration, such work of art can never be exhausted by me, I could always see it from a new perspective if I moved somewhere else for example. Hence, I can always discover another facet of this thick entity that is rich with an infinity of aspects instead of being an object with clearly determined and finite properties (which was possible only because it was thought from outside of the world and without the body): this is why the change of perspective in art is co-dependent on a change of ontology. The exploration of the Prouns' aspects is illimited because it is an exploration occurring in the world, opened to time and space, and not an exploration within the painting – or within my representation to take up again the painting as an allegory of my relationship to the world. Therefore, the point of view is not imposed on me (as it is by following the convergence lines in the paintings of the Quattrocento), but I can willfully change my point of view and adopt the one I want – in the limits of the possible movements of my body – when the painting takes place in the sensible world we both share (instead of within itself). This is what guarantees the richness and the thickness of the paintings expressing the ontology of the flesh. I could also give other examples, such as Picasso's *Guitar* or Rauschenberg's works, but those would all be examples of works of art that escape from the ontology of the object and conquer the dimension of touch and coexistence (and not exclusively of vision anymore) by borrowing some elements from sculpture or architecture, namely by invading the physical world outside of the frame. However, I would like to consider if it is possible or not to express the ontology of the flesh and provide a synaesthetic experience while still painting within a frame and without adding external elements.

Deleuze's and Merleau-Ponty's answer is that yes, it is possible, and they take respectively as example: Francis Bacon for Deleuze and Cézanne for Merleau-Ponty. Instead of trying to be mathematically faithful to the objects they want to represent, those artists bring some distortions that can look strange at first, but which are not arbitrary at all since they are the fruit of the artistic reflection and labour that aims at being the most faithful possible to the things in their flesh (Deleuze, 2005). Those distortions are needed because if the shape of the existing thing was represented too accurately, it would apply the ontology of the object to that thing and turn it into a geometrical idea instead of something real and existing, which is the problem with Quattrocento's technique: it allows to represent an idea but not to present something in its flesh. Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the notion of contour to tackle this problem and he underlines Cézanne's solution:

The contour of objects, conceived as a line encircling the objects, belongs not to the visible world, but to geometry. If one outlines the contour of an apple with a continuous line, one turns the contour into a thing, whereas the contour is rather the ideal limit toward which the sides of the apple recede in depth. To outline no contour would be to deprive the objects of their identity. To outline just one contour sacrifices depth – that is, the dimensions which give us the thing, not as spread out before us, but as full of reserves and as an inexhaustible reality that nevertheless radiates a common style. That is why Cézanne follows the swelling of the object in a colored modulation, and outlines several contours in blue lines. Referred from one to the other, the gaze captures a contour that emerges from among them all, just as it does in perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 74).

This means that Cézanne's way to be faithful to the depth and density of the things is to merge several perspectives at once, in a composition or fusion of several perspectives that manages to impose a temporal and spatial exploration of this work to my body. By referring to these temporal and spatial dimensions of my experience, the painting avoids being imprisoned within the frame while keeping away from adding external elements. Thus, a painting can manage to break free from the object's ontology on its own, even "within a frame" in front of us. When it does, it demands from us a haptic vision in order to grasp those different perspectives together, which gives the work of art true depth and thickness. The problem of Quattrocento's paintings (according to the prism of the ontology of the flesh) was that they unfolded a single and unique perspective, which can give rise to a mathematization and an absolutization of this single viewpoint. The advantage of Cézanne's and Bacon's works in this regard is that they cannot be exhausted by a single perspective – just as the things that my body perceives in the world – therefore, they manage to bring something of my whole bodily experience to the painting, they evoke a true depth that is true precisely because it cannot ever be reduced to a single perspective. Le Breton talks about the vision required to see such depth as a

syncretic view [that] brings out a style of presence, it isn't empty of details; on the contrary, it integrates countless points of view because it doesn't choose and stays open to any sign (2017, p. 82).

Each apple in Cézanne's still lifes is not one, but a multiplicity of them at once. Cézanne does so in order to render the apple itself, in its synaesthetic totality, which is not an ideal essence in itself but an incarnated essence: the flesh of the infinity of perspectives we could take on it, the source and crossroads of the different senses. Hence, to grasp such experience, it is my whole body with its situation and every single one of its senses and dimensions (temporal, spatial...) that must approach the work. Thus, even in the case of a painting strictly located

in a frame, like with Cézanne and Bacon, my sight must bring all of my body with it and become a haptic vision to be able to seize the depth and the thickness of what is to be seen.

There is the last case I would like to discuss that could broaden even more the scope of what we call visual arts, namely the case of the Navajo's sand paintings. Those beautiful paintings made with sand and pigments are at the heart of a quarrel related by David Le Breton in his book *Sensing the World: An Anthropology of the Senses*, about whether to display them in a museum or not (2017). The Occidental culture has been immersed for a very long time in the ontology of the object, with a traditional conception of the painting as something that is to be seen from a distance and that doesn't concern me directly, as something that is there solely for the eyes' pleasure (we can find here the dichotomy subject-object at work once again). Thus, it is only logical that some occidental connoisseurs of art have been filled with rapture when they saw those sand paintings and wanted to fix them with some glue and exhibit them in a museum to share this beauty with as many people as possible, which is not a reprehensible endeavour in itself. However, this idea is ethnocentric since it ignores and denies the wealth of various dimensions in which those sand paintings participate in the life of the Navajos, and that is why some of them opposed this undertaking. Indeed, the sand paintings are not created for an aesthetic purpose, but they are rituals that are supposed to enable an ill person to find his or her harmony again with the cosmos – as, in this culture, illness is “due to losing harmony with the world, the hozo, whose translation implies simultaneously health and beauty” (Le Breton, 2017, p. 50), and can be healed by retrieving it. Furthermore, the sand painting is not even primarily visual in the Navajo culture since it must be placed on the ill person's body and then dispersed in order to be effective. Therefore, there is a tactile dimension to the sand painting, as well as a therapeutical one. Moreover, there are also religious and symbolic dimensions to the sand painting. Indeed, every colour used and object, animal or person depicted in it has a precise meaning and summons a particular god depending on the type of illness that needs to be cured: “each object has its place in a cosmology where everything is connected” (2017, p. 51). This is also the reason why those paintings are meant to be ephemeral: the gods are summoned in person through this painting, so the Navajos shouldn't be keeping them there for too long nor use this power in vain. Now we can understand how the occidentals' will to turn those strong rituals into permanent display in a museum, devoid of their original purpose, can appear as an outrageous blasphemy to the Navajos. As a result, “in 1995, the traditional Navajos healers rose up against those ambitions that twisted their knowledge” (2017, p. 52). Yet, a few other healers offered an alternative by providing to museums – for the sake of preserving their cultural legacy – sand paintings that deliberately contain mistakes (for example a change of colours or objects)

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to avoid summoning the gods, who know too well and wouldn't answer the call from a wrong ritual. These mock paintings were also not blessed by pollen nor accompanied with chants. According to Le Breton,

the neutralisation of the paintings' symbolic power was the price to pay for entering into a world of pure contemplation, which doesn't hold the same meaning at all to the Navajos' eyes (p. 53).

On top of that, he adds that

any museography offers to the eye what most often comes under an object's power, which is never reducible to its sole appearance nor only to vision. Museography's very device and organisation lean upon the reduction to sight by dismissing its symbolic dimension, which is necessarily alive and inscribed in a common experience (pp. 53–54).

Thereby, our culture's ontology and approach to painting made us overlook and deny this multiplicity of aspects and dimensions, thus reducing this total work to its visual aspect.

As a conclusion, I would like to add that, more generally, any sensible object can participate in a multitude of dimensions depending on history, cultures, and individuals. Any one thing is not solely or primarily visual in itself, but is already always a thick entity or bundle of experiences from different fields of life that, by one of its aspects, also participates in the visual field. Some approaches to arts – such as the ones analysed in this paper – manage to grasp and tackle several of these dimensions at once. In this way, if we move from an ontology of the object to an ontology of the flesh, we can see that visual art doesn't have to be restricted to the shallow sense of vision, but that it can also become a total art that involves the whole of our body and sensory senses, as well as the multiplicity of our existence's dimensions. This exemplifies how philosophy and art can develop in parallel through a sensory approach to break free from the rigid frames that previously defined their respective fields. Thereby, both can reach the whole of our experience of the world, which is the crossroads where all the disciplines and fields can meet, intersect and become entangled. Moreover, adopting an ontology of the flesh that renews with the interrelatedness of the perceiver and the world (as well as of sight and touch) might prove to be a better framework to deal with the ecological crisis since one of its roots lies in the separation made by modern philosophy between the subject and its "environment", considered a world of isolated and independent objects. Hence, a sensory approach allowed to provide a relevant framework for philosophy through the prism of visual arts, as much as it produced a cohesive philosophical interpretation of art history.

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