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# *Tracing the Invisible*

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I will address Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of Merleau-Ponty, focusing on both philosophers' treatment of painting and drawing respectively. I will detail Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *chiasmus* as the intertwining relationship between the visible and invisible to deflect Derrida's deconstructive analysis. For Derrida, the 'trace' of drawing is always haunted by an ambiguity, the aporia at the heart of vision itself. I contend that such an ambiguity is already articulated by Merleau-Ponty inherent in the visible, marked by the very opacity of the body. I will argue it is an ambiguity never fully explored in Derrida's deconstructive analysis and while Merleau-Ponty insists on embodiment as the disclosive force between the visible and invisible, Derrida remains on the side of textual surface.

## **I. Introduction**

In his seminal essay, "Eye and Mind" (1960), Merleau-Ponty grounds his discussion on painting through the body that constitutes a clear development of his earlier work. This leads toward an ontological theory of painting that begins to consider the visible and its reciprocal relationship to the invisible that pervades Merleau-Ponty's last great unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). It is this incomplete text that generates an evocative response and re-reading of Merleau-Ponty by Jacques Derrida. In *Memoirs of the Blind* (1991), Derrida also marks the borders of this threshold between the visible and the invisible, mobilised through the graphic act of drawing. This paper interrogates the particular reading of Merleau-Ponty by Derrida through both philosophers' engagement with the visual arts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida's most explicit treatment of Merleau-Ponty in his late work *On Touch, Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005). In this text Derrida concludes that Merleau-Ponty has mis-read the essence of touch that Husserl proposes in his own philosophy. For Derrida, this has invariable consequences for alterity while also underlining the hierarchy between vision over touch.

## 2. Merleau-Ponty's Eye and Mind

Within the tradition of philosophy consciousness was reified as the centre of knowledge and action. In his work Merleau-Ponty attempted to recast this understanding by emphasizing the bodily operations that are necessary to make consciousness possible in the first place.

I have only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it, even if I do not know how this happens in the nervous system. My moving body makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible .

The above quote from "Eye and Mind" condenses the essential concerns and propositions of his earlier work, the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), where Merleau-Ponty builds upon the influence of Edmund Husserl and Gestalt psychology to articulate a new position of embodied perception.

In the first section of "Eye and Mind" Merleau-Ponty re-iterates the limiting scope of the natural sciences that invariably mark the body as a technical body "[...]where human creations are derived from a natural information process, itself conceived on the model of human machines". For him, there are a range of non-conscious processes that occur through our breathing, eye adjustments, sophisticated movements and reactions that deny such reductive treatments that dominate the natural sciences and traditional epistemology. Congruent with his earlier work, the body through its motile arrangements becomes the very site of perception itself and consequently for Merleau-Ponty, painting is naturally embodied.

Developing out of this, Merleau-Ponty highlights painting as the medium that can elucidate the hidden contingencies of the visible. The convergence between the "profane vision" and the painted scene, the invisible, is revealed through the 'reflexivity' of the body." The body not only reveals the visible world through its pre-conscious, apprehensive movements but the visible world and motor intentionality fold into each other. This folding or 'palpation' of vision is realised most resolutely through the act of painting. Although painting celebrates and evokes the other side of the visible it is never totalizing but exemplifies the solicitation of a world of meaning and significance. For Merleau-Ponty:

The painter “takes his body with him,” says Valery. Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement .

This argument was already marked in his earlier, essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1946) where Merleau-Ponty found an artistic correlative to his own project in the painting of Paul Cézanne. Through his painting, Cézanne suppresses the schematization of the mind in explicitly shaping the lived world. The body perspective is expressed as not something static but something ever changing through our body motility that opens up those objects that solicit us. The eye — and by extension the body — are constantly shifting to gain an optimal grip on the world. Cézanne’s lived perspective reveals the objects, the cup, and the bowl of fruit as they appear through the act of perception. The scenes in his still life never appear fixed but always suggest movement, a body never at rest. For Merleau-Ponty, this motor awareness is not a conscious activity but is always occurring at a primary level of perception. By lending his body to the world, Cézanne explicitly marks our actual lived mobile perspective. In essence, Cézanne is not painting the world, as such, but painting how we relate to the world. By ‘lending his body to the world’, Cézanne explicitly marks our actual lived mobile perspective.

In the later work, there is movement in Merleau-Ponty’s thought, whereby in “Eye and Mind” he remarks that “The visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being” . Here the world itself is shedding the last remnants of objectivity, as something outside ourselves. The body schema, an essential concept in his earlier work is being ontologically grounded.<sup>2</sup> The world becomes the ‘visible’.

<sup>2</sup> “The theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.239). This highlights the significance that Merleau-Ponty places on the body schema which determines that through underlying, bodily arrangements with the world I become aware of a world. Interestingly he states that “[...] The body image is finally a way of stating that my body is in-the-world” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.115). It is worth noting that the word ‘in’ here is significant, whereby in the later work the body through the flesh is not only ‘in’ but ‘of’ the world.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *flesh* extends from this articulation, an ontological principle that becomes the ground level of our immersion in the world. The *flesh* is the filament, an element which binds beings and the world together, enabling differentiation, the space for Being itself to appear. In his final works, this difference constituted as *reversibility* leads Merleau-Ponty to devise this concept of the *flesh*. Note that for Merleau-Ponty "the flesh is an ultimate notion" a carnal expression of our intimate bound up relations to the things in the world.<sup>3</sup> The body is now bound to the visible through the *flesh*. The visible encompasses the world *and* the body, for both are "[...] total parts of the same Being [...]" that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement". The body not only reveals the visible world through its pre-conscious, apprehensive movements. It now also reveals itself through vision as that which is part of the visible. In "Eye and Mind" Merleau-Ponty contends:

The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the "other side" of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself.<sup>4</sup>

Thus vision and visibility are inscribed upon each other, the visible active in vision prior to conscious articulation, emanating from the spread of the invisible. Painting, for Merleau-Ponty, best exemplifies this solicitation and order. It is through the concept of depth that this occurs. Depth gets considerable and more attuned attention in Merleau-Ponty's late work. While in the *Phenomenology of Perception* depth is analyzed as a more technical aspect of the perceptive act, it forms a crux around which he devises his new concept of the *flesh*. Here Merleau-Ponty articulates

<sup>3</sup> As Merleau-Ponty states: "To designate it we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 139).

<sup>4</sup> This idea is already considered in his earlier work where he points out "[...] how can we possibly dissociate the certainty of our perceptual existence from that of its external counterpart? It is of the essence of my vision to refer not only to an alleged visible entity, but also to a being actually seen." (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.436).

depth as a means to uncover the interconnectedness of both the artist and the world that is expressed through their work. Cézanne is again influential by apparently exclaiming that “Space must be shattered this fruit bowl broken [...]” for a more meaningful, ontological, understanding of space. Cézanne understood intuitively when Merleau-Ponty declares that “[...] we must seek space and its contents as together .” Reversibility of both the painter and the painted is revealed. As Cézanne remarks “The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness.” This reversibility, a folding over of the perceiver and the perceived, is at the core of Merleau-Ponty’s essay and is something painting by its very nature reveals.

### 3. Derrida’s Eye and Hand

In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida turns to drawing as a device to weave together different artistic themes such as blindness, memory and self-portraiture. But what is most striking in the text is his return to the body and in particular the relationship between the hand and eye that are invariably responsible for the mark making process of drawing (and writing)<sup>5</sup>. However, in contrast to Merleau-Ponty, Derrida insists “We are talking here about drawing, not painting.” Recall, drawing for Merleau-Ponty is always re-appropriated through painting. Merleau-Ponty contends that there remains an inherent danger in the line, one that divides and sets up boundaries between subject and object that inevitably denies the very thickness of the perceived visible world. It is painting that reveals the very depth of the world.

However, for Derrida, drawing not painting becomes the very mode of considering the visible and its inherent relationship to the invisible. To think of drawing is to think of a commitment to vision and to what is visible. For Derrida, the mark or trace (or ‘trait’) constitutes a commitment to the visible but it also inscribes within it is the site of the invisible. The visible – that which we see – is always redrawn through our activity of seeing.

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<sup>5</sup> Always writing for Derrida; drawing becomes an extension of writing. “I then scribble with my right hand a few squiggly lines on a piece of paper attached to the dashboard or lying on the seat beside me . . . These notations—unreadable graffiti—are for memory; one would later think them to be a ciphered writing.” (Derrida 1993, p.3)

In order to be absolutely foreign to the visible and even to the potentially visible, to the possibility of the visible, this invisibility would still inhabit the visible [...] The visible *as such* would be invisible [...]"

The 'right on the visible' corresponds to the mark of the line, the recession of the trait through the process of drawing itself. Here Derrida proposes a whole re-reading of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and Invisible*. But he disputes what he considers to be a layering of the invisible that Merleau-Ponty prescribes. "To be other of the visible, absolute invisibility must neither take place elsewhere nor constitute another visible" It is his conviction to an 'absolute' invisible that separates his concept from Merleau-Ponty's. Derrida suggests that he is deferring to Merleau-Ponty's "pure transcendence" as the site of the invisible, that which remains unavailable but persistent in the visible.

As I mentioned, we can already see that drawing for Derrida is fundamentally different to Merleau-Ponty's conception of it. He does not think of drawing in terms of a divisive static outline to be subsumed under the rendering of a painted thickness. Derrida wants to think drawing differently and so proposes two hypotheses that echo binocular vision. The two hypotheses are defined as abocular and double genitive respectively. It is the abocular which marks drawing as a kind of blindness. Derrida evokes the myth of the blind man as a seer evoking the parallel between the artist and blind person as visionaries that bring to light that which is yet to appear in vision. Here the hand of the blind person is present, rushing ahead, exploring space, gesturing as drawing. Similarly, when the draftsman focuses on the object, without looking at the canvas or page he or she draws precipitively, "[...] the hand ventures forth . . . rushes ahead." The hand leads, tracing out the other side of the invisible. In the second case, the double genitive, Derrida comments that blindness still permeates drawing while the eye 'represents'. The artist, in this case, "invents drawing" as 'trait'.<sup>6</sup> When the draftsman focuses on the canvas, the object becomes

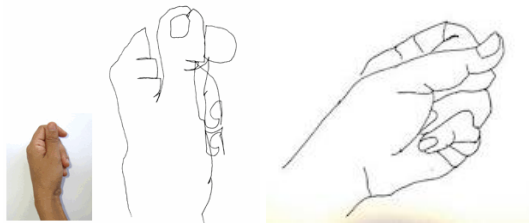
<sup>6</sup> Robert Vallier in his essay "Blindness and Invisibility" defines these terms as follows. In the first instance "Abocular hypothesis is also explorative [...] the very operation of drawing could be performed without the eyes [...] but with the hand. The hand rushes ahead without seeing, leaping without looking [...] The hand, holding onto and using the inscriptive instrument, explores the space ahead of it, blindly feeling its way through the



secondary. The artist relies on memory and draws anticipatively.<sup>7</sup>

darkness. “In the second hypothesis Vallier defines the double genitive as a restitution “Between model and copy there is the spread of invisibility through which the draftsman’s gaze must pass in order to draw [...] the draftsman relentlessly pursues it (the trait) in the night and quickly traces it on the canvas, restoring to the light of day before it fades from memory” (Vallier 1997, pp.193-195)

<sup>7</sup> An example of the contrast between both thinkers can be seen through a drawing exercise, which I have both participated in and taught, called blind contour drawing [FIGURES 1 AND 2]. The student is asked to draw an object without looking at their page but by focusing on the object and drawing what they see. In practice this seems simple but is much harder to achieve. We feel compelled to look at the page to measure up the drawing to what we see. The results initially tend to be quite distorted but with practice the marks being made on the page begin to correspond to the object in front of the viewer in a most extraordinary way. The results reveal a very primary view of an object, one prior to the work of a conceptual perspectival schema that is often grafted onto the flat picture plane of a page. The purpose of the exercise is to reveal the implicit awareness the body has of space ahead of a ‘correct’ schema being imposed by the mind. It breaks the habitual trained perspectival approach of representing what we see. There remains something elemental about the results of this exercise that illustrate the essential hand eye synthesis at work. The marks made converge toward an outline of an object and this is where Merleau-Ponty’s notional sacrifice of depth in drawing could be contested. The line acts as a boundary, the outline brings forth, while the page is pushed back. The outline reveals an object against the flat white of a page, the threshold or boundary of perceptual depth is marked out. Depth is achieved through the very contour of the outline. Merleau-Ponty does re-evaluate line in “Eye and Mind” using Leonardo’s concept of the “flexuous line” to denote the generative quality available in line. But it is Derrida that gives the much richer account of the drawing process that highlights this generative quality of the line and how it marks not a boundary but a threshold. Where I disagree with him invariably leads me back to Merleau-Ponty, because the body enables the process of mark making through both its comportment and style. In Derrida, the threshold is never recognized as depth.



FIGURES 1 AND 2. *Examples of Blind Contour.*

Therefore blindness surfaces, as the trait and recedes in the visible “[...] escapes the field of vision.” A shadow of the object is traced at the moment of this blindness.

Derrida locates a dualism that is operative in the act of drawing that equates to hand before eye and eye before-hand. But Derrida's insistence is that through either mode of mark making, blindness is present. This represents the “[...] two great ”logics”” of the invisible at the origin of drawing. Thus two hypotheses and accordingly, two ”blindnesses””, about drawing take shape. Blindness becomes the aporia— the condition for the possibility for drawing at all. Derrida is not talking here about a pathology of the body, but the blindness invoked during the act of drawing itself which is indicative of that which sustains the drawing itself. For Derrida, the key lies between the space of both ’logics’. There is an inherent interdependency between these two hypotheses that are enabling of the mark making process. Recall in broader terms, the Derridean ‘trace’ (which becomes ‘trait’) is the absent part of a sign's presence. It marks the parasitical necessity in any binary position, for two opposing points rely on each other for the very constitution and sustenance. In this instance the ‘trait’ marks the recession of the line into the invisible. I quote at length:

We have been interested thus far in the act of tracing, in the tracing of the trait. What is to be thought now of the trait once traced? A tracing, an outline, cannot be seen. One should in fact not see it (let's not say however: “One must not see it”) insofar as all the colored thickness that it retains tends to wear itself out so as to mark the single edge of a contour: between the inside and the outside of a figure. [...] Once this limit is reached, there is nothing more to see, not even black and white, not even figure/form, and this is the trait, the line itself: [...] Nothing belongs to the trait, and thus, to drawing and to the thought of drawing, not even its own “trace” [...] The trait joins and adjoins only in separating .

What Derrida evokes however is the impossibility of the original trait to be witnessed when we return to the perceived object. We cannot locate a particular outline that has been scribed onto the page. What the lines describe disappear in front of us. Suddenly the exercise of drawing is impressed upon all who look upon the world. Thus all we are left with is a

shadowy outline of the visible articulated through the blindness of drawing; we are left with the gesture to an invisible field, that which is 'right on the visible'.

Even here whether drawing is improvised, mimetic or not the 'trait' remains "unbeseen" by the artist. Robert Valier notes that the "[...] trait passes through the invisible and remains there [...] because the space of difference between the thing and its representation is and remains abyssal: there is no possibility of return." So in essence, Derrida is highlighting the impossibility of the retention of the trait once the mark is traced. At the site of the mark the trait recedes into this invisible field. Memory then, evidenced in the marks made on the page is not enough to grip this passing, this recession into the invisible. The marks are the tracings of this movement of the trait into invisibility. But, and this is crucial to Derrida, it is precisely in this passing into the invisible — this difference between the invisible and the visible — that vision itself becomes possible at all.

Derrida claims that drawing is neither abocular nor double genitive in its operation but the intertwining of both, a chiasmatic relationship. However, following Merleau-Ponty, I argue that because Derrida has to relegate the body, movement cannot be invoked as imperative to the very act of mark making. It is not just the movement of the hand but the ever restless eye that attempts to gain maximum grip in a perspectival situation. The eye is as much precipitative in drawing as the hand is.

So how does the Derridean visible correspond to Merleau-Ponty's concept of the visible? It is through our earlier description of depth that another significant divergence appears. Recall Merleau-Ponty's attempt to re-think depth beyond the tradition of Cartesian spatial co-ordinates. I remarked that depth is an essential feature in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, deployed through our body schema and actualized in the painting of the world. Derrida's lines can have no depth, for they are constantly disappearing from view. In "Eye and Mind" depth becomes the 'primary dimension'. It is not a dimension that is restricted to a conventional measurable notion but a space where things come into being through their relations with other things. Depth cannot be the "unmysterious interval" but exists primarily as a necessity to perceive. It is not to be confused with the perception of distance but is instead a lived phenomenon of orientation that anchors any conception of distance. Depth

is that which reveals the thickness of vision which is indicative of the *flesh* which subtends it. Merleau-Ponty states “[...] my body simultaneously sees and is seen.” and for him the visible, intertwined into vision (as depth), is the interconnection between body and world. “He who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is of it.”

However as noted, for Derrida, depth does not exist — it is only surface. There is no flesh for Derrida which is contiguous to vision and visibility. Recall that for Derrida in *Memoirs of the Blind*, that which makes the visible possible is the invisible; that which makes vision possible is blindness. Reversibility, the chiasm and intertwining are not for Derrida thought through the sedimentation of meaning that is available to corporeal sensitivity as they are for Merleau-Ponty. Instead, for Derrida, meaning is defined through a textual interplay of signifiers that is always deferred. This is why Derrida's line must sacrifice depth, for this deferral can never be actualized. For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, through depth an intertwining always occurs. I suggest that this in fact relegates Derrida's 'phenomenological description' of hand and eye as a body of mere technicality, a body of 'surface' — a technical body that Merleau-Ponty explicitly resists in “Eye and Mind”.

In contrast with Merleau-Ponty, Derrida disputes what he considers to be a layering of the invisible that Merleau-Ponty prescribes.<sup>8</sup> It is his conviction to an 'absolute' invisible that separates his concept from Merleau-Ponty's. Derrida appears to suggest that he is in fact deferring to Merleau-Ponty's “pure transcendence” as the site of the invisible, that which remains unavailable but persistent in the visible. But for Merleau-Ponty, the invisible is:

Not a de facto invisible [...] not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being .

Recall the disappearance of the line for Derrida, where the invisible must always remain beyond the reach of the visible. The *punctum caecum*, a

<sup>8</sup> “To be other of the visible, absolute invisibility must neither take place elsewhere nor constitute another visible.” (Derrida 1993, p.52)

physiological blind spot on the retina is “[...] an analogical index of vision itself, of vision in general, [...]” and Derrida mobilises the example of the *punctum* to illustrate the limit or blind spot in vision itself. Correspondingly, Merleau-Ponty describes the *punctum caecum* as that which, although marked by blindness, makes vision possible. “What it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible.” The convergence of both philosophers’ work echo loudly here.

Both Robert Vallier and Jack Reynolds respectively argue that the *punctum caecum* represents the very site of intersection between Derrida and Merleau-Ponty. Vallier in particular treats the *punctum* as that which “[...] constitutes the irremediable absence [...] the body that is blind.” What he is proposing is that the body as perspective articulator, reveals the visible through the *flesh* and invariably is sustained through blindness. This is a style that is our very mode of being in the world. Reynolds on the other hand, notes that it is this very difference in their conceptions of the invisible that leads Derrida to abandon “Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic conception of visibility and invisibility, which precludes the one ever being considered in isolation from the other.” I argue that Vallier doesn’t press home enough the fact that it is the corporeal body *itself* that contrasts their particular definitions of invisibility. Following Reynolds, I maintain that Vallier attempts to conflate both philosophers’ understanding of invisibility and passes over Derrida’s insistence of the ‘absolute’ that corresponds to Derrida’s treatment of alterity. Derrida’s gesture or call to “transcendentality” seems to be a particular inflected reading of Merleau-Ponty’s text that distils the body out of this mixture of the chiasm. The *chiasm* is the reversibility or folding between body and world which captures or marks the very nature of the flesh, this element that allows Being itself to appear.<sup>9</sup> This appeal to ‘transcendentality’ is, I would contend, the very moment of Derrida’s deconstructive interpretation. Although Merleau-Ponty concurs with a visibility predicated by invisibility he envisages the relationship

<sup>9</sup> “The chiasm is not only a me other exchange (the messages he receives reach me, the messages I receive reach him), it is also an exchange between me and the world, between the phenomenal body and the “objective” body, between the perceiving and the perceived.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 215)

as one bound up in a chiasmus.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Self-Portraiture

In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida focuses on the significance of self-portraiture, particularly the temporal nature of the body itself. As Derrida spots, self-portraiture is the idiom that best embodies this movement of self from subject to object. In fact, the self-portrait is presented as a ruin which not only points at the invisible as constitutive of the visible but also marks the materiality of the mortal body, a body susceptible to age and decay:

Just as memory does not here restore a past (once) present, so the ruin of the face [...] does not indicate aging, wearing away, anticipated decomposition, or this being eaten away by time - something about which the portrait often betrays an apprehension.

Memory, as in Derrida's analysis of the graphic act, becomes central to this distinction. The ruin as memory plays itself out on the canvas.<sup>11</sup> Here at this site of 'ruin' we can outline another difference between both philosophers. In traditional self-portraiture, the face is often a privileged part of the body and in the self-portrait the face becomes equivalent with identity. Indicating a continued search for something, an identity that remains elusive, both Cézanne and Van Gogh continually returned to the self-portrait.

<sup>10</sup> Reynolds acknowledges Martin Dillon's argument that both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida use the figure the chiasmus in different ways. (Reynolds 2004. pp.74-75)

<sup>11</sup> In fact, I would suggest that the temporal body codified through the play of textual signifiers might be more readily portrayed through photography or film a medium Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and Mind" displays a distinct coolness. (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p.144-145) A more contemporary take on the portrait that I think aligns both philosophers thinking while utilizing new media is a film, *Zidane: a 21st Century Portrait* (2006) by video artists Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno. Here both artists filmed Zidane during a match focusing on movement and temporality, characterized by the body. We do not see the match only Zidane's performance and the piece is broken up by a ten minute newsreel that recounts the news events on that particular date. We get the body in all its motorized potential codified and stratified by events, images and commercials. This example comes closer to chiming with the potential Merleau-Ponty spots in film in his lecture series *The World of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p.97-99).

For Derrida, the affordance of fractured identity is borne out through the process of portraiture itself.

Unfortunately, Merleau-Ponty never mentions self-portraiture explicitly but in "Eye and Mind" he continually asserts the intersection between the perceiver and perceived. He, like Derrida, notes that we are reliant on a mirror to reveal other parts of our bodies i.e. our face, our back. Thus for Merleau-Ponty, there remains an implied opacity to the body and an incomplete sense of ourselves visually. It is through the "reflexivity of the body" that:

The experience I have of myself perceiving does not go beyond a sort of imminence, it terminates in the invisible, simply this invisible is its invisible, i.e. the reverse of its specular perception, of the concrete vision I have of my body in the mirror.

This mirroring enables self-portraiture by reflecting back that which remains invisible to us in our habitual day to day practises. Recall the *punctum* that marks for both this impossibility of transparency. In order to paint or to draw a self-portrait an artist must, through the aid of a mirror, render themselves objectively. But for Merleau-Ponty, this reflective image incurs an alienation that importantly is released through the act of painting or rendering the portrait itself. I contend that for Merleau-Ponty instead of 'ruin' through *deconstruction* there is a gestalt through *reconstruction*. For Merleau-Ponty, painting can elucidate the hidden contingencies of visibility themselves revealing a necessary subjectivity always embedded in a world.

## 5. Conclusion

In a late interview entitled "Spatial Arts" with Peter Brunette and Davis Wills (1994), Derrida comes close to paralleling the invocation of style that Merleau-Ponty invokes in his later writings.<sup>12</sup> Recalling an encounter with

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<sup>12</sup> Style for Merleau-Ponty is not just a subjective quality that the artist's talent expresses through their own unique comportment. Style is something that is part of our "motor potentiality", (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.369) acting at a sub-reflective level, and revealing things in the world that call for our attention. It is visible not only in our speech or expression but also in our very bodily comportment. An artist can extend or express this

Van Gogh's paintings, Derrida states "I am given over to the body of Van Gogh as he was given over to the experience." Derrida acknowledges the distinctive brushstrokes and style that invite the viewer into that experience. The body is implicated through this style of painting or 'writing' in the Derridean sense. Crucially and in contrast to Merleau-Ponty, Derrida once again resists positing the body as the genesis of encounter. Rather, the body that 'haunts' Van Gogh's painting is "[...] ruptured [...] riven by nonpresence, by the impossibility of identifying with itself [...]" In a particularly explicit comment Derrida remarks that the body is "[...] how should I say, an experience in the most unstable [voyageur] sense of the term; it is an experience of frames, of dehiscence, of dislocations." This is a remarkably candid explanation of how he conceives of the body. Such explanation stands in stark contrast to Merleau-Ponty who consistently appraises the body as our essential insertion into a world of meaning and significance. It is the body through its sub-reflective potential that reveals the 'dehiscence' or difference through an unfolding between subject and object. Of these sub-reflective body operations there is an explicit denial by Derrida. Importantly, these operations are not only the very foundation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy but define the very style of the artist more generally. Instead Derrida evokes the 'signature' which Van Gogh "[...] signs while painting".<sup>13</sup> This signature is not cashed out through bodily comportment but through the failure of presence to assemble at the site of the invisible. Thus we are left with the Derridean trope of the trace, the ruin, the dislocation of presence made explicit. Once again, there is a limitation imposed upon the body as ontological possibility.

Merleau-Ponty observes how consciousness forgets the gestalt from which objects appear from. He also notes, while critiquing Husserl that the problem of forgetting in a temporal sense is its discontinuity — "[...] it

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bodily comportment or body schema into a work of art. See also Merleau-Ponty's essay on painting and language *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*. (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, pp. 76-120)

<sup>13</sup> This echoes Derrida's earlier essay "Signature Event Context" (1988). Here Derrida interrogates communication and transmission of meaning through context. In relation to the signature Derrida notes how the signature as an act of writing communicates the absence of the addressor. In the case of Van Gogh this signature is written large through the manipulation of paint through brush strokes which act as signatory elements.



would be the point where the *clear image* is no longer produced because the corporeal trace is effaced." He contends that this vocation toward a 'clear image' through reflection is the forgetting that effaces the chiasmatic relationship between mind and body, subject and world. I contend Derrida comes closest to denoting this relationship in his consideration of drawing in *Memoirs of the Blind*. His articulation of aporetic structures that infect traditional dualisms highlight broad convergences between both philosophers but this aporetic rejoinder appears to forget or occlude a more nuanced reading of Merleau-Ponty's evocation of the chiasmus. For Derrida, the 'trace' of drawing is always haunted by an ambiguity, the aporia at the heart of vision itself. I contend that such an ambiguity is already articulated by Merleau-Ponty inherent in the visible, marked by the opacity of the body; "[...] the untouchable of the touch, the invisible of vision, the unconscious of consciousness (its central punctum caecum, that blindness that makes it consciousness [...]) This opacity, I argue is an ambiguity never fully explored in Derrida's analysis of Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, the visible is not traced after the fact, as it is for Derrida, but reborn out of the spread of the invisible. While Merleau-Ponty insists on embodiment as the disclosive force between the visible and invisible, Derrida remains on the side of textual surface.

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