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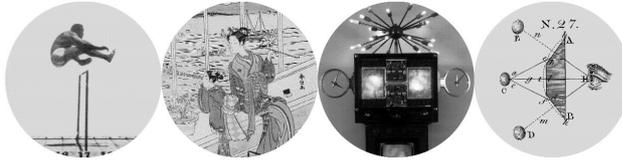
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Carnal Relations: Embodied Sight in Merleau-Ponty, Roger Bacon and St Francis

Suzannah Biernoff

Abstract

This article attempts a medieval Christian rereading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic and unfinished text, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Along the way, it complicates current notions of ocularcentrism, as well as the idea of an embodied gaze. The privileged term in these historical fragments is flesh: in Merleau-Ponty and in medieval Christianity, a carnal presence insinuates itself into the relations between bodies, between things and thoughts, self and world. In the end, the speculative encounter between the two central studies offers a new perspective on debates about the historiography of vision and the peculiar potency of the visual world.

Keywords

body schema • embodied vision • flesh • gaze • incarnation •
ocularcentrism • optics

We can imagine a disembodied mind having visual experiences but not tactile ones. Sight does not require our being part of the material world in the way in which feeling by touching does.

(G.N.A. Vesey, 'Vision', *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967: 252)

True philosophy consists in re-learning to look at the world, and in this sense a historical account can give meaning to the world quite as 'deeply' as a philosophical treatise.

(Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962: xx)

Vision is often imagined (*L. imaginare*, 'to picture to oneself') as an intellectual act, and ocular metaphors dominate our accounts of knowledge

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and understanding. I will say 'I see what you mean' if I have understood you, or I might question the clarity of your ideas (from the Greek *idein*, 'to see'). Seeing and knowing are linguistically and symbolically entwined in Indo-European cultures (Tyler, 1984). The mind has its own 'eye' with which to inspect and to speculate (L. *specere*, 'to look at or observe') and I can try with this interior 'eye' to put things 'in perspective': to take a step back, remove myself from the scene, and survey the situation more 'objectively'.

This ancient constellation of metaphors helps to explain why sight has so often been characterized as the least bodily of the senses. In the Aristotelian tradition, vision was associated with cognition, while touch was the sense most fundamental for survival (Aristotle, 1984). There is almost an evolutionary logic to the classical sensory hierarchy, with sight representing the human potential for knowledge, the capacity to transcend the particular through reason; and touch, the primordial sense, signifying the animal nature we share with the beasts. Keller and Grontkowski summarize the epistemological formula of western philosophy in a sentence: vision 'connects us to the truth as it distances us from the corporeal' (1983: 209).

This article aims to complicate recent accounts of ocularcentrism or the primacy of vision by comparing two moments in a more intimate and distinctly corporeal history of vision: one premodern, the other modern – albeit with a postmodern afterlife (for example, Busch and Gallagher, 1992; Dillon, 1991; Foti, 1996). The resonances between medieval visual theory and Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied vision are not evidence of a continuous history, and scientific developments during the intervening centuries produce very different ideas about the nature of visual 'contact'. Nevertheless, remarkable similarities emerge from the encounter imagined here: most importantly, a relational understanding of vision, embodiment and subjectivity; and the role of the flesh in figuring these relationships.

My first set of examples is drawn from the later medieval period in Western Europe, beginning around 1200. In terms of the broader histories of vision and visuality, the 13th century is interesting because scientific attention to optical theory and empirical observation coincided with a more general reorientation and discursive elaboration of sight, as a perceptual process but also as a means of social communication and spiritual communion. To paraphrase Umberto Eco, one might speak of a perceptual shift from symbolism to naturalism during this period: instead of looking *through* the visible world towards a higher, invisible reality, many people (among them scientists and artists) looked attentively *at* nature (Caviness, 1991; Eco, 1988). They also looked at God. As Gothic churches were being adorned with painted altarpieces, crucifixes, fresco cycles and liturgical objects, devotional practices were becoming increasingly focused on the visual perception of the sacred as well as on techniques of interior visualization. An emphasis on private devotion from the 13th century onwards provided the impetus for the production of illuminated manuscripts; small, affordable devotional paintings and sculptures; and the construction of family chapels. The later Middle Ages also saw the popularization of 'indulgence images' associated with the remission of sin, and a proliferation of miracle-working images.

Visual metaphors and ocular desires pervade 13th-century scientific and theological texts, sermons, folklore and the literature of courtly love. Sight is celebrated as the foundation of empirical knowledge and the means by which Christians can understand God's divine nature as well as his humanity. A look could harm or caress; it could reveal the mathematical structure of a walnut or the mystery of the sacred wounds; it could serve the spirit or the flesh, idle curiosity or philosophical reflection. All of these beliefs and practices might be described as ocularcentric, but this would be to suggest that the privileging of sight amounted to a coherent discourse rather than a set of ideas and behaviours that were often in conflict. W.J.T. Mitchell is right to question some of the assumptions that have informed recent discussions of ocularcentrism, particularly its association with modernity. He maintains (and I agree) that the 'notion of vision as hegemonic or non-hegemonic is simply too blunt an instrument to produce much in the way of historical or critical differentiation' (2002: 174). Instead of a unified 'regime' of vision, one finds in the Middle Ages a deep ambivalence towards vision and the visible and also, unsurprisingly, an ambivalence towards the body. It is this particular nexus of vision and embodiment that I wish to explore here. In the heterogeneous texts and images that bear traces of medieval ways of seeing and knowing, two distinct tendencies or traditions can be discerned, and each is articulated in relation to the body or flesh.

The more familiar tradition – to which I have alluded already – privileges empirical observation and intellectual insight. Roger Bacon's *Perspectiva*, one of the most influential western medieval texts on optics, opens with the claim that optical science is 'the flower of the whole of philosophy'. Through optics, 'and not without it, can the other sciences be known' (1962, Vol. 2: 420). Bacon (c. 1214–92) studied at Oxford and Paris, and joined the Franciscan Order in 1257. By the time he began his major works in the 1260s, he had access to translations of a wealth of Arabic material on optics that had not been available to his predecessors, and it is the synthesis of Greek and Arabic learning for which he is most famous (Lindberg, 1976, 1983). Optics was to be the key that would unlock the natural world. As well as being an object or field of study, *perspectiva* was a way of seeing, a discipline in both senses of the word: the verb *perspicere* means to survey or scrutinize, to investigate thoroughly, to 'see through'. Geometrical abstraction functioned something like an X-ray, enabling the 'perspectivist' to discern the underlying structure of the natural world. If this sounds like a chapter in the progressive rationalization of sight, it is worth pausing over some of the affinities between medieval science and theology. Steven Goldman (1982) has argued that modern science shares with medieval Christian thought a certain symbolic or 'iconic' tendency. Instead of displacing the symbolizing sensibility of Augustine and his medieval followers, geometrical optics could be said to have extended that mentality into the equally symbolic language of mathematics. Well practised in reading nature as 'a book whose author was God' (Goldman, 1982: 10), medieval scholars such as Bacon were fluent when it came to the elaboration of physical or geometrical 'allegories'. Seen in this way, scientific naturalism – like its pictorial equivalent – must be regarded not in fact as natural, inevitable and universal, but as cultural and semiotic.

The other reason to be sceptical of allusions to a singular (objectifying, disembodied, dispassionate) 'scientific gaze' is that medieval science paradoxically contributed to a broader cultural investment in *bodily* experience. This happened largely through the influence of Aristotelian thought from around 1200, with its valorization of the body as the foundation of knowledge. Following Aristotle, Bacon insists that sensation occurs in the *organs* of sense: the eyes, the nerves of the skin and surrounding flesh, the internal organs of the brain. In the Aristotelian Middle Ages there was no mind-body 'problem' (Putnam and Nussbaum, 1994). The images of the visible world reproduced in the eyes and brain are, for Bacon as for Aristotle, *material* images. The idea of a disembodied mind having visual experiences is an oxymoron in this context because the sensitive soul is embodied; its perceptions and emotions 'enmattered' (Aristotle, 1984: 1.1.403a25).

This Aristotelian understanding of the body-subject coincided with a new devotional emphasis on the bodily (especially visual) experience of an increasingly human God. As with the abstractive, 'symbolizing' tendency in medieval religion and science, this seemingly contradictory privileging of material bodies and images suggests a cross-fertilization of medieval science and spirituality. I will focus on just one point of confluence here: the theory of sensible species and its significance for the devotional ideal of *imitatio Christi*. From a modern point of view the theory of species is one of the more peculiar details of premodern science. The term comes from the Indo-European *spek*: 'to see'. In its archaic sense, it simply meant 'aspect, form, or exterior appearance' (Lindberg, 1983: liv), but by the later Middle Ages species had become the foundation of neo-Aristotelian physics. Following Aristotle and his Arabic commentators, Bacon claimed that species radiated from everything in the physical world to produce effects (Lindberg, 1983: lv). *Sensible* species were responsible for perception. Sight, said Bacon, occurs when the species of an object 'impresses' its form on the responsive matter of the eye and brain: not in the superficial way that a seal is reproduced in wax, but a deeper impression that produces a transformation 'in the interior of the recipient' and not just 'in a surface' (Bacon, quoted in Lindberg, 1983: 45). When we talk of being affected or 'moved' by something, we are using a figure of speech that derives ultimately from this Aristotelian principle that sensation is a 'qualitative alteration' (Aristotle, 1984: 2.4.415b). To perceive or sense (there is no distinction between sensation and perception for Aristotle or Bacon) is to be materially altered.

The medieval phenomenon of *imitatio Christi* shares a number of basic principles with Bacon's optics, most importantly the conviction that sight entails a physical transformation of the spectator. St Francis of Assisi's conversion before the crucifix 'proved' that seeing was not only believing, but being assimilated with Christ's flesh and blood through a visual interaction. In the official biography of St Francis, Bonaventure's *Legenda maior*, the saint's identification with Christ is described in the most detailed and naturalistic terms. Written between 1260 and 1263, the *Legenda* was used by Giotto for his frescoes of the life of St Francis in the upper church at Assisi. Francis's flesh becomes 'wax', moulded into the image of the crucified Christ:

As the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a wondrous glow, but on his flesh also it imprinted a no less wondrous likeness of its tokens. For his hands and feet seemed to be pierced through the midst with nails, the heads of the nails shewing in the palms of the hands, and upper side of the feet, and their points shewing on the other side; the heads of the nails were round and black in the hands and feet, while the points were long, bent, and as it were turned back, being formed of the flesh itself, and protruding therefrom. The right side, moreover, was – as if it had been pierced by a lance – seamed with a ruddy scar, wherefrom oftentimes welled the sacred blood, staining his habit and breeches. (St Bonaventure, 1904: 139–40)

The ‘image’ of Christ received by St Francis is more than a pictorial likeness; it is a sculptural reproduction. In fact, Bonaventure (1904) mixes his metaphors. God is the divine sculptor, fashioning the image of Christ out of flesh; but he is also the Word, writing his creation into existence. St Francis bears the marks of the crucifixion ‘written on his members of flesh by the finger of the Living God’ (1904: 141). This ambiguity surrounding the mode of representation (writing or sculpting) is not confined to theological discussions of *imitatio Christi*. Mary Carruthers (1990) has shown that metaphors of writing/reading and picturing/viewing were central to medieval discussions of memory. Whether written and read or pictorially represented and viewed, memory was conceived as a physical process; a bodily imprint as real as St Francis’s stigmata. In this sense, the devotional practice of identification with Christ mirrors (and no doubt exploits) the medieval ‘art of memory’, with its emphasis on bodily sight, interior visualization, and the mnemonic articulation of memory images (see Bennett, 2001). To gaze, like Francis, at a crucifix, or to meditate on scenes from the Passion, would have been to enter into this fabric of associations and expectations.

It seems axiomatic to say that vision is crucial to visionary mysticism. However, little has been written on the subject beyond the observation that religious images frequently served as a stimulus and focus for visions (for example, Hamburger, 1990, 1992; Ringbom, 1969). Julian of Norwich’s ‘showings’ are typical in this respect. Completed in around 1393, the diary of her 16 revelations is marked by the seemingly ubiquitous presence of a crucifix. For example, the Second Revelation begins with the words: ‘I looked with bodily vision into the face of the crucifix which hung before me, in which I saw a part of Christ’s Passion ...’ (1978: 193). Jesus appears before her bodily eyes, and it is his corporeal, visible presence that precipitates her own physical and emotional ‘passion’. It is possible to explain St Francis’s encounter with Christ in terms of an intense psychological identification or read Julian’s visions as hallucinations, her pains and paralysis as psychosomatic symptoms. The alternative is to approach visionary literature in its historical context: to ask why *imitatio Christi* was so plausible and compelling as a spiritual goal. Julian and Francis would not have explained the changes in their bodies in psychopathological terms, but they would certainly have thought of sight – ordinary or miraculous – as a *physical* interaction. My

argument is that miraculous visions and mystical revelations merely amplify the corporeal effects of ordinary sight as understood by Bacon and his commentators. Similarly, the functions and significance of medieval images (both mental and extramental) reflect a specifically medieval understanding of vision.

Vision, in the medieval world, did not leave the viewer untouched or unchanged. The consequences of looking when one should not were well rehearsed; but one could also expect to be positively changed by judicious looking. If (following Aristotle) perception is defined as assimilation (Bacon, in Lindberg, 1983), the objects of one's attention are of critical importance. Devotional texts repeatedly instruct their readers to visualize the Virgin with her child, to recollect every detail of Christ's life and death; to gaze at his wounds and, through extended meditation, to identify with his suffering and with his mother's sorrow (see Despres, 1989). Interpreted in light of medieval (rather than modern) theories of perception, the visual apprehension of Christ's self-sacrificing love or the Virgin's grief emerges as something other than a process of verbal or non-verbal 'communication'. In semiotic terms we are dealing with a special kind of language: a corporeal text or somatic sign that is 'read' by the viewer's body. Sacred images, such as the miraculously transformed bread and wine of the mass, were no longer merely symbols of a transcendent reality. They might contain doctrinal lessons, or make the stories of the Bible come alive. They could engender feelings of remorse or compassion, or enable the viewer to identify with Christ's suffering or the Virgin's sorrow; but in addition to these sanctioned roles, devotional images staged an affective encounter with a God made flesh. Studying historical accounts of embodied vision helps us to make sense of the power that images have exercised. It also sheds light on their prohibition. Iconoclasm and iconophobia confirm the transformative potency of images – not primarily as communicative media, but as objects that inexplicably and irresistibly affect our feelings and behaviour.

There are intriguing parallels between medieval descriptions of embodied vision and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of perception in his last unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the mind's incarnation (in a generalized 'flesh' that exceeds individual bodies) and his metaphor of perceptual intertwining recall the kind of reciprocal, corporealized sight described by Bacon and others in the later Middle Ages. In both scenarios vision has an ambiguous character: it is 'of' the body (in the sense that our gaze feels like an extension of ourselves), yet at the same time it seems to originate in the world. In the final part of this article I will discuss some of the similarities and differences between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of embodied sight and the corporealities of medieval spirituality and Aristotelian natural philosophy. Such distant and empirically unconnected sources are not brought often into dialogue, but I think it can be a valuable strategy for several reasons. Approaching medieval visual culture from a phenomenological perspective raises questions about the prioritization – and denigration – of bodily experience historically. Why do some cultures, institutions and traditions censor or repress bodily

experience, while others privilege and elaborate it? What are the ethical, legal and spiritual implications of these two positions: one in which human subjectivity is imagined as essentially disembodied (mind, soul, consciousness); the other in which self, agency, memory and intersubjectivity are embodied? Do these contrasting versions of the self engender different visual, spatial and social practices; different aesthetic sensibilities?

These are of course vast questions, and their answers lie beyond the modest scope of this article. My aim here has not been to interpret medieval visual culture from a modern phenomenological perspective. Reversing the more usual order of interpretation I have instead approached Merleau-Ponty from a medieval Christian perspective. One of the effects of this exercise has been to illuminate (if not elucidate) a key term that Merleau-Ponty reappropriates from Catholicism: *flesh*. I have argued elsewhere (Biernoff, 2002) that flesh (*caro*) and body (*corpus*) are terms with quite different associations, and distinct genealogies.¹ In medieval sources, and in Merleau-Ponty's writings, 'flesh' exceeds the visible body. Sight lends the flesh an intersubjective dimension; it literally carries carnality outside the viewer's corporeal envelope and into the world. In his *Confessions* (written c. 400) St Augustine admits to 'dwelling externally in the eye of my flesh' (1953: 60). Of course, in the context of the 'sins of the flesh' the term denotes human bondage rather than communion, but nonetheless there is a sense of the flesh being something held in common. Flesh has a generic quality. The redemptive flesh of Christ is shared by communicants during the ritual of the Eucharist and becomes the communal foundation of the church. Meister Eckhart (c.1260–1327) uses the marital imagery in Genesis 2:24 – 'They were two in one flesh' – to elucidate the relationship between matter and form, or 'the sense faculty and the sense object' (Meister Eckhart, 1981: 105).

For Merleau-Ponty flesh is 'the formative medium of the object and the subject' (1968: 147). At times visible, but often invisible, this flesh is no ordinary thing. It is a 'possibility, a latency' – not an object or idea, but an 'atmosphere' or 'element' (1968: 84, 139). Every interaction between myself and my environment, every idea, sensation, movement or act of communication is a 'carnal relation' (1968: 84). The perceptual encounter, for example, is likened to the meeting of sea and strand, distinct and yet fluid. My gaze 'envelops' things; like the incoming tide it 'clothes them with its own flesh'; but in the process it also reveals things: 'veiling them, it unveils them' (1968: 130–1). Thought and language are 'sublimations' of the flesh; 'less heavy, more transparent' than the flesh of the body (1968: 153). The formative, elemental 'flesh of the world' is described as a 'primordial *One*' (1968: 84, n. 15), yet it gives birth to alterity through its 'folds' and 'invaginations' (1968: 141, 149). Merleau-Ponty rejects the Cartesian model of the self as a centred and autonomous consciousness (for which the body serves as a container or instrument). Rather it is the body – itself a fold in the 'landscape' of the flesh – that provides unity because it 'assembles into a cluster the "consciousnesses" adherent to its hands, to its eyes' (1968: 141, 149). The mind is simply 'the *other* side of the body', a depth or dimensionality that '*overflows*' into the body, 'encroaches upon it, is hidden in it – and at the same time needs

it, terminates in it, is *anchored* in it' (1968: 259; working notes dated June 1960).

There is something at once originary and redemptive about the flesh in *The Visible and the Invisible*. As an 'incarnate principle' (1968: 139) it reprises the central Christian mystery of 'God made flesh'. Both incarnations are essentially enigmatic because they enact an intertwining of opposites: visible and invisible, immanent and transcendent, spirit and matter, unity and multiplicity. Theologians might insist on the miraculous *reconciliation* of opposites in the incarnate Redeemer, but there is a real sense in which personal spirituality – as well as bitter theological debate – has often been animated by the unsettling paradoxes of the Incarnation. In 'Faith and Good Faith' Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Pascal's comment that 'the dogmas of the Incarnation and Original Sin are not clear but are valuable because they reflect man's contradictions of body and soul, nobility and wretchedness' (1964: 175). His own desire to reveal the 'strange and paradoxical' nature of the world through phenomenological reduction is not so dissimilar to the discipline of religious contemplation (1962: xiii, 43). The 'indirect' dialectical method is a 'negative philosophy' akin to 'negative theology' (1968: 179).

Merleau-Ponty was raised in a devoutly Catholic family. Simone de Beauvoir recalled that early in their friendship he described himself as a 'quiet unbeliever' but nevertheless insisted that truth must be sought within one's own social and religious boundaries. It was the first of many disagreements, and she recounts her embarrassment at discovering that her 'best friend' at university was a member of the 'Holy Willies', a group of left-wing Catholic intellectuals (Bair, 1991: 124). Merleau-Ponty became disillusioned with the church as a young man, frustrated by its lack of political engagement. This rejection of Christianity as an institution took place against the backdrop of the Second World War, and 'precisely during the period when he was seeking an alliance with Marxism *in some institutional form*' (Rabil, 1967: 215–18, original emphasis). By 1945 when *Phenomenology of Perception* was published, he was openly critical of mainstream Catholicism. What he objected to was the idea of God as an absolute consciousness or being, a separate totality: 'if God exists', he wrote in 1947, 'then perfection has already been achieved outside this world; since perfection cannot be increased, there is, strictly speaking, nothing to do' (1964: 174). Often described as an atheist, his position was more equivocal than that (Bannan, 1966; Rabil, 1967). In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1953, he reserved a place for the sacred within philosophy, not as a totality but as a *relation*:

If one remembers the history of the word *atheism* ... we must admit that all thinking which displaces, or otherwise defines, the sacred has been called atheistic, and that philosophy which does not place it here or there, like a thing, but at the joining of things and words, will always be exposed to this reproach ... (Merleau-Ponty, 1963: 46).

If the sacred is to be found between words or things, so too is the self. For

me, this is the most significant parallel between Merleau-Ponty's ideas and the medieval understanding of embodiment, subjectivity and vision. One finds in both a *relational* definition of self, perception and meaning; a fluidity of being that undermines the modern ideal of centred, bounded and autonomous subjects.² In *The Visible and the Invisible* the poetic terrain of the maternal body confounds the binary thinking that opposes self to other, body to mind, and sensation to thought. We are bound to being by an 'umbilical bond', a 'continuous tissue that joins us vitally to the things and to the past' (1968: 107, 125). Our primary reality – the pre-linguistic experience that Merleau-Ponty is attempting, paradoxically, to articulate – is one of 'perpetual pregnancy, perpetual parturition, generativity and generality' (1968: 115).

Carnality is difficult to *think* precisely because it does not resolve into empirical or logical categories. The same conceptual difficulty is a feature of medieval discussions of carnality (which, coincidentally, also exploit feminine metaphors: see Biernoff, 2002: 31–4). The flesh is both visible and invisible, an attribute of bodies and thoughts, gazes and shadows: Alan of Lille, writing in the 12th century, referred to the flesh as a 'fog' (1980: 183–4). Flesh transgresses the boundaries separating inside from outside, visible from invisible. In the Middle Ages, the vicissitudes of the flesh often gave rise to theological anxiety and hostility, and also to fantasies of transcendence. For Merleau-Ponty the ambiguities of carnality denote the generative 'flux of perceptual life' (1968: 32). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, the poetic landscape of the flesh becomes a dialectical field: 'that which admits reciprocal actions or interactions ... [and] cannot be contemplated from without and in simultaneity, but must be effectively traversed' (1968: 89–90). Dichotomies are abstract, static and essentializing, promising the 'whole view' in one totalizing sweep. The dialectical journey must be traversed at close range and believed in at every turn.

For Christians, of course, the road is not (it is usually hoped) endless. At the point, finally, where Christianity offers answers to life's questions, our two case studies diverge completely. As Merleau-Ponty argued in his 'Lecture on Montaigne':

The value of religion lies in this, that it reserves a place for what is foreign to us, and that it knows our fate to be enigmatic ... As a questioning, religion is justified as long as it remains without answers. (quoted in Bannan, 1966: 348–9 n. 16; see also Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 174–8)

The 'hyperdialectic' that Merleau-Ponty (1968) preaches refuses the imagined comforts of heaven (synthesis, resolution, rest) and instead courts ambiguity and plurality. However, there is a further disagreement between our case studies. As models of embodied vision they rely on very different understandings of visual 'contact'.

Bacon regarded the active visual force as an extension of the embodied soul. As an organ of the soul, the eye 'passes over the separate points of a visible

object', 'grasp[s] its surface and contain[s] its extremities' (1962, Vol. 2: 440, 468). This is a long way from the modern understanding of vision: while we regard the gaze as an active force, with psychological and social effects, we do not think of it as having any physical existence. A look or a stare might be tender or threatening, but these perceptions are not believed to have any *physical* basis. As Teresa Brennan notes, the gaze is 'immaterial, symbolic indeed, "metaphorical"' (1996: 219). Was Merleau-Ponty then merely using a figure of speech when he wrote that 'the things attract my look, my gaze caresses the things' (1968: 76)? What happens, exactly, when visible objects 'arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence' (1993: 125)? Clearly, Merleau-Ponty did not believe that our visual contact with the world was *physical* in the medieval sense, although he admitted 'a sort of truth in the naïve descriptions of perception: *eidola* or *simulacra*, etc' (1968: 209). So what kind of contact does sight allow? In a note dated April 1960 the sensation of being looked at is described as a sort of 'telepathy':

One feels oneself looked at (burning neck) not because something passes from the look to our body to burn it at the point seen, but because to feel one's body is also to feel its aspect for the other. One would here have to study in what sense the other's sensoriality is implicated in my own ... (1968: 245)

Merleau-Ponty only hints at the extent of this corporeal and sensory 'interimplication', but it evidently builds on the idea that our bodies are a hinge between self and world. We experience them as both subject (for itself) and object (for the other). We are 'passive-active', 'sensible-sentient' and 'visible-seeing' – although we are never conscious of both sides of the hyphen or hinge simultaneously (1964: 162–63; 1968: 137, 271). As soon as I become aware of being watched or catch my reflection in a window, my body acquires a 'halo of *visibility*' (1968: 244, original emphasis) and my interior world recedes. The reversibility of vision is treated as universal by Merleau-Ponty: my body has evolved as 'an organ to be seen' (1968: 244); but the illustrations he uses raise unexplored questions. A 'woman in the street feeling that they are looking at her breast, and checking her clothing' (1968: 189) is not interchangeable with her male (imagined or real) observers. The bodies of observer and observed may be interimplicated – on one side a side-long look or subtle change of gait, and on the other side an involuntary flush of embarrassment and checking of buttons – but the parts they play in this mundane drama are not reversible. To rephrase Merleau-Ponty, one would have to study the extent to which our sensoriality (in this case our sense of being visible) is inflected by gender, race, class and age.

Returning to the burning neck, the gaze that 'burns' (or protects, or caresses) has become part of my body – my skin, my self-conscious gestures, my quickened pace. My empirical limits are also disrupted by my own gaze, which feels like an extension of my sentient body as it 'rests on' things, 'holds' another's eyes or 'searches' a crowd. Either way, seeing and being seen are part of the subject's *schema corporel*: our non-conscious, 'tacit understanding' of our bodies *in relation* to concrete situations and specific tasks.

Objects (and gestures, places or people) are perceived against the 'double horizon' of one's own body schema and the external world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 101). My body schema is the 'background' of all my thoughts, feelings and actions. Shaun Gallagher uses the phantom limb phenomenon to clarify the difference between *body image* and *body schema* in Merleau-Ponty's writing: while the patient's body image is a conscious and empirically 'true' representation of his postoperative condition, the 'phantom remains part of the body schema, part of the practical attunement of the body to its environment' (Gallagher, 1998: 226).³ Born of our relations with our physical and social environment, our body schema 'cannot be mere physiology or mere consciousness' (1998: 237).

Vision, finally, is relational for Merleau-Ponty because it reveals the intertwining of perceiver and perceived: on the one hand, the act of seeing seems to take us outside our bodies into the world; yet on the other hand, what we see is inside us, somewhere 'behind' our eyes. 'My vision is at the thing itself', but it is also 'my own or "in me"' (1968: 29). Although informed by different scientific paradigms and separated by some 700 years, there are compelling *structural* similarities between Merleau-Ponty's 'perceptual faith' and Bacon's synthesizing approach to the visual theories of his day. For Bacon, sight was both passive and active: we are physically altered by things that we see (a process known as 'intromission'); but our eyes are also channels for a radiant power of vision (the theory of 'extramission'). The synthesis of extramission and intromission produces a dynamic perceptual relationship, and this reciprocal 'gaze' is echoed in discourses of carnal and spiritual sight.

What are the implications of these intimate visions for the study of visual cultures? Art history as a discipline could be said to have its empiricist origins in modern ocularcentrism. Its clear delineation of spectator and image; the delimitation of more or less discrete stylistic or symbolic entities; more recent attempts to view these objects in their historical, cultural or economic 'perspective': these ways of making sense of visual artefacts are also ways of seeing. The question is, might other ways of seeing generate different forms of knowledge and methods of inquiry? To what extent does Merleau-Ponty's perceptual 'intertwining' (or Bacon's synthesis of extramission and intromission) translate into the practices of historiography and criticism?

One of the things that Merleau-Ponty offers is a challenge to rethink the 'object' of historical (or any other kind of) knowledge as a dynamic interaction. In the case of a devotional image, for example, where the visual and affective encounter traverses the visible frame, it is necessary to shift one's focus – and perhaps one's disciplinary skills – so as to try and elucidate the historical significance of that encounter. I have attempted to do this here by returning to the fundamental question: what *is* vision? If *seeing* is a cultural (and gendered) practice as well as a physiological process, then it cannot provide a historical common ground or the basis of a shared aesthetic experience. History and philosophy can play a similar role in defamiliarizing the familiar.

Notes

1. The significance of the terms *caro* and *corpus* within the medieval archive is discussed at length in Biernoff (2002). The following commentaries provide a varied introduction to the debates and historical sources: Bynum (1995), d'Avray (1994), Le Goff (1992), Lochrie (1991) and Welton (1998).
2. Bynum argues that medieval bodies seem more ambiguous and 'elastic' than their modern counterparts (1991: 108–9, 114, 218–22). Similarly, Laqueur highlights instances of biological fluidity. Prior to the Enlightenment, he contends, 'Culture ... suffused and changed the body that to the modern sensibility seems so closed, autarchic, and outside the realm of meaning' (1992: 7).
3. Although Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly differentiate body image and body schema, Gallagher (1998: 232) argues that he uses these terms consistently to mean different things. The distinction is lost in the English translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* where *schema corporel* is confusingly translated as 'body image'.

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