Art and Flesh:
A Psychology of Art by Way of Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract

Artistic experiences and aesthetic experiences may instigate changes in the psychological character of existence by way of ontological re-structurings of the person. This conclusion arises from the study of Merleau-Ponty’s writings on art and his last work posthumously published, The Visible and the invisible (1964/1968). The essay presented here progresses from a discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s ontological concepts of flesh and the visible and invisible and their relationship to art, to the nature and role of consciousness for ontology and a psychology of art, and finally to the parts played by imagination and physiognomy in a psychology of art. Artistic experiences and aesthetic experiences are agencies of change in the ontology and psychology of human beings.

Artistic and aesthetic experiences are not to be confused, much less conflated, with "art appreciation". The latter term involves cognitive assessment and value judgment of works of art. Art appreciation is employed in the domain of education. An application of it is found in the commercial enterprises of for-profit art galleries and of art auctions. [Etymologically, "to appreciate" derives from _ad + pretium_; that is, "to, towards, or for price".] Museum acquisitions involve both educational and purchase meanings.

Art appreciation is a term generic in its definitional direction and it is nonspecific with respect to the intensity and depth prepotencies that issue from the ontological dimension of the work of art. These prepotencies burgeon in artistic and aesthetic experiences. While art appreciation is informational in character, artistic and aesthetic experiences touch upon and are touched by the ontology of works of art. Those contacts institute psychological consequences. The focus of this essay is on the experiences of the visual arts of painting, drawing, and print-making which may not be _pars pro toto_ for all of the arts, but which do have a kindred significance for the other fine arts of sculpture and architecture and, in less direct ways, for the performing arts such as music, dance, theatre, and, in subtle ways, for literary art.

"Artistic experiences" are on the part of the makers of the work of art. Documents by artists such as correspondence and journals, research and journalistic interviews of artists, and their autobiographies and biographies include accounts of artistic experiences. "Aesthetic
experiences", which are had with the perceptual response to completed works of art, are equally available to the inquiries of investigators and to programs of research. The ontological dimension is to be engaged existentially, not solely on the level of philosophical conceptualizations. Ontology is the deepest stratum of genuine works of art. It is to that place that this essay seeks to go.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writings are outstanding in this regard. He plumbs the art of Cézanne in “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1993a), considers the art of language and the language of painting in “Indirect Language” and the “Voices of Silence” (1993c), and addresses the visual experience in “Eye and Mind” (1993b). These three essays, especially “Eye and Mind”, are preamble to Merleau-Ponty’s (1964/1968) The visible and the invisible, which is the primary text of reference for this essay and which is explicit in its discussion of the ontological character of what Merleau-Ponty calls "flesh" and the "visible and invisible" that intertwine in visual art.

Johnson (1993) points out that, “Eye and Mind” was first published in January 1961. It was the last work Merleau-Ponty published prior to his sudden, premature death on 3 May 1961, at the age of fifty-three (p. 36). The terribly untimely close to Merleau-Ponty’s life, in addition, intervened in the completion of what would have been Merleau-Ponty’s further work, The visible and the invisible. Claude Lefort was the assembler and organizer of that work’s material for posthumous publication (1964/1968). However much its character as a work-in-progress (especially the “Working Notes” part of it), The visible and the invisible is the most developed edge of Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on ontology.

The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader is a solid resource volume in which the editor, Galen A. Johnson (1993), has gathered together the three essays by Merleau-Ponty mentioned above, a number of authoritative essays on Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics, and his own perspicacious commentaries on Merleau-Ponty’s essays. They are all within the realm of philosophy. Recourse, here, is had to this volume. Reference is also made to Edward Casey’s (1976) philosophical discussion of imagination in relation to artistic and aesthetic experiences.

From the perspective of phenomenological psychology, the work of Amedeo P. Giorgi (1985, 1987, 2009) is a crucial part of the caravan that this essay musters in a phenomenological psychological understanding of the making of art and of aesthetic experiences. The "mission of art", which is the redirection of ordinary quotidian perception (Ó Cluaináin, 1979), and imagination’s role (Ó Cluaináin, 1987) and physiognomy’s assignment in these experiences (Cloonan, 2005), in addition, are core to them. The Gestalt psychologists Rudolf Arnheim and Wolfgang Metzger’s works deserve recognition from phenomenologists. Arnheim (1966) is an agent for clarification of the interaction between perception and imagination and that is acknowledged in this essay. The less well known but no less important Metzger (1936/2006) has conducted investigations on the psychology of perception that at least at one point arguably verge on Merleau-Ponty’s ontological "visible and invisible" – with all the reservations that one must have toward the presence of naturalist assumptions in those investigations. In the presentations of this essay, all these references intercalate with the primary Merleau-Ponty documents that are above mentioned.

The thesis of this essay is that Merleau-Ponty’s presentation of "flesh and the visible and invisible" is the clearest ontological explication of the context within which artistic and aesthetic experiences take place. The essay progresses from the discussion of these terms for the sake of a phenomenological psychology with its existential program for a re-directed living through both
making art and aesthetically experiencing it, to the position of consciousness in the psychology of art, and finally to imagination and physiognomy’s roles in artistic and aesthetic experiences.

**Flesh and the Visible and Invisible**

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology lexicon is a stumbling block to the writers and readers of mainstream psychological literature. The subtlety of language in Merleau-Ponty’s “Eye and Mind” that continues and flourishes in his *The Visible and the invisible*, quite manifestly in its “Working Notes”, may dissuade psychologist readers from expectation that Merleau-Ponty’s writings have accessible relevance to the psychology of art. I refer here particularly to Merleau-Ponty’s vocabulary of “flesh and the visible and invisible”.

The positivist nature of American psychological glossary is the major contributor to that difficulty. Johnson says, “We need a new philosophical language that would not ignore the strangeness of the world, even if it would of necessity speak indirectly and in half-silence” (1993, p. 37). More so, psychologists need to appreciate the inadequacy of conventional psychological language for discourse on ontology and its relationship to psychology in general and to the psychology of art and aesthetics specifically. Let us attend, therefore, to Merleau-Ponty’s "flesh and the visible and invisible".

**Flesh**

"Flesh" is provocative. Its provocation lies in the various denoted and connoted meanings of it that range from the raw and freshly butchered meat of the slaughterhouse, to the naked body in erotic situations, and then to the religious and shocking, “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will live in me and I in him” (John 6:56). Why is a word with such combuste qualities used in the presentation of ontological conceptualizations?

Merleau-Ponty’s employment of the word "flesh" is neither sensationalist nor arbitrary. The antecedents of it go back to Husserl’s description of the "touching and being-touched" phenomenon (1952/1989, pp. 152-159). Husserl’s discussion of touching and being touched and his incorporation of the perceptible within the perceiver (grasped "in the flesh") are part of his legacy to Merleau-Ponty. A propos of this legacy, Merleau-Ponty (1960/1964) in his essay, “The philosopher and his shadow” in *Signs*, says,

> When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a "physical thing". But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right, *es wird Leib, es empfindet* [it becomes Body (flesh), it senses (feels)]. The physical becomes animate. Or, more precisely, it remains what it was (the event does not enrich it), but an exploratory power comes to rest upon or dwell in it. […] it ("this description") results in an ontological rehabilitation of the sensible. […] When we say that the perceived thing is grasped "in person" or "in the flesh" (*leibhaft*), this is to be taken literally: the flesh of what is perceived […] reflect(s) my own incarnation and [is] its counterpart. (pp. 166-167)
The German wording, “Es wird Leib, es empfindet” [“it becomes body (flesh), it senses (feels)’’], is straight from Husserl (in German, 1952, p. 145; in English translation, 1989, p. 152). In “The intertwining” – The “chiasm” section of The Visible and the invisible (1964/1968, pp. 130-155), Merleau-Ponty makes a number of references to the touching and being-touched phenomenon, references that occasion his discussion of flesh and the visible and invisible. There is a segue of development from Husserl’s thoughts on the cogent phenomenon of touch, therefore, to Merleau-Ponty’s new ontology of flesh and the visible and invisible.

The word "chiasm" is a key for understanding Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of his new ontology of flesh and the visible and invisible. He says, “the idea of chiasm, that is: every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is inscribed and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of” (1964/1968, p. 266). Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary defines "chiasma" ("chiasm") as, “an anatomical intersection or decussation”. Reference to the etymology of the word, from the same source, brings us to a more generic level of the meaning of the word, at which level Merleau-Ponty’s usage of it may become clearer; "chiasma": New Latin, X-shaped configuration, from Greek, crosspiece, from chiazein to mark with a chi, from chi (X)".

The essence of chiasm is intersection such as the intersection of a cross. Decussation is "the action of crossing”. Merleau-Ponty’s use of the word chiasm is for the "crossing" of the referents in whatever contexts his book’s passages are presenting (e.g., the crossing of "touching" and "being touched"; the crossing of the "visible" and "invisible"). Chiasm functions as a metaphor in the service of "a fundamental identity-and-difference" of ontology. It is among other metaphors (such as dehiscence, fission, divergence [écart], and intertwining) that Merleau-Ponty employs for this purpose, as Dillon (1988) points out. With respect to this fundamental identity-and-difference and these metaphors for it, Dillon says, “there is here no "monism of the phenomenon", but there is no dualism, either. There is, instead, flesh […]” (1988, p. 157).

Perceptual psychologists are familiar with the word "chiasm" in the physiology of the eye. In optic chiasm, “the nerve fibers from the nasal half of each retina cross, so that each hemisphere of the brain receives input from both eyes” (VandenBos, 2007, p. 651). This partial crossing, the definition continues, is called a partial decussation. The decussation of optic chiasm is in reference to a neural, structural intersection in which there is a "crossing" of neural fibers for the purpose of crosslateral transmission of neural messaging to terminal visual cortical centers in both hemispheres. Through the neural operations afforded by the optic chiasm, the visual experience is a more integrated and fuller reality. At the cortical level, binocular depth perception is enhanced over and beyond the overlapping of visual fields that register from the neural messaging coming solely from just, respectively, the left and right eyes.

The understanding of chiasm’s decussation in the physiology of visual experience may facilitate the perceptual psychologist’s appreciation of Merleau-Ponty’s employment of chiasm, for example, in the experience of touch, the dynamics of flesh (e.g., "flesh coils upon flesh"), and rather pertinently in the experience of the visible and invisible. Using the word "chiasm”, Merleau-Ponty adheres to the etymological and generic meaning of chiasm’s decussation, the "intersecting or crossing”. For perceptual psychologists, the optic chiasm is available as an analogy for the chiasmatic bonding of "touching" and "being touched" in tactile activity whose non-anatomical decussation is simply the instant of "touching-touched". It becomes an analogy.
for the chiasmic bonding of the "visible" and "invisible". The decussation or crossing of the visible and invisible, Merleau-Ponty tells us, is effected in the painterly action of the visual artist.

Barbaras (1991/2004) comments on the antecedence of Husserl’s thought on "touch" for its significance for Merleau-Ponty (pp. 153-161), and he specifies "intertwining and chiasm".

Such is the meaning, then, of the intertwining and of the chiasm: the duality of subject and object, which merges at the level of the one perceiving because the one perceiving makes himself world, merges thereby at the level of the perceived; the perceived is "on my side", it is set into my flesh, in agreement with visibility […]. Ultimately, it is a matter of taking literally Husserl’s formula according to which the thing is grasped "in person", "in the flesh (Leibhaft) […]". (pp. 158-159)

Merleau-Ponty thus extends the legacy of Husserl’s presentation of the phenomenon of touch to the use of the term flesh in *The visible and the invisible*. Merleau-Ponty formulates ontological implications of touch in his presentation of flesh. His new ontology presents a radicality that distinguishes it from the ontology of Husserl’s philosophy. Along with it, he proscribes any assumed derivation of flesh from a duality of body and spirit. Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) declares, “we must think it (flesh), as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being” (p. 147). He continues later on:

> The flesh of the world is not explained by the flesh of the body, nor the flesh of the body by the […] self (cf. spirit) that inhabits it […]. The flesh of the world is not *self-sensing* (*se sentir*) as is my flesh – it is sensible and not sentient – I call it flesh, nonetheless […](p. 250)

The non-dualist difference between the flesh of the world and the flesh of the body (body understood as embodied subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty’s *le corps propre*) is a difference of differentiating distinction. It is not a difference between metaphysical realities in exclusion of each other. With continuing emphasis, Merleau-Ponty states, “flesh […] is the sensible in the twofold sense of what one senses (the sensible) and what senses (the sentient)” (p. 259).

For some, an immediate misunderstanding of flesh in Merleau-Ponty’s presentation is that it is an expression of philosophical monism. Their number is perhaps greater. Merleau-Ponty is declarative on the non-monistic nature of flesh. “The flesh of the world is not *self-sensing* (*se sentir*) as is my flesh – It is sensible and not sentient” (p. 250). As Dillon (1988) puts it in his reading of Merleau-Ponty, “[Merleau-Ponty] repeatedly rejects the monistic resolution: that an apparent difference between visible and invisible can be resolved by a real identity” (p. 157).

The subtlety of the distinction between flesh as sensible and flesh as sentient is lost to philosophical monist analyses just as it is lost to the mutual exclusivity of dualist thinking. Dillon (1988) expatiates on Merleau-Ponty’s position:

> Trees and mountains do not see; they are blind witnesses to my own visibility. The body as exemplar sensible does not function as an example of sensibility in inanimate things. The human body is that particular kind of flesh that allows the flesh of the world to double back on itself and be seen. (p. 169)
With finality, Merleau-Ponty says toward the end of The visible and the invisible, “a world that is neither one nor two in the objective sense – which is pre-individual, generality” (p. 262). Merleau-Ponty then says, “start from this: there is not identity, nor non-identity, or non-coincidence, there is inside and outside turning about one another” (p. 264).

Merleau-Ponty, finally, references flesh to Being.

The flesh of the world is of the Being-seen, i.e. is a Being that is eminently percipi [to be perceived], and it is by it that we can understand the percipere [to perceive]: [...] all this is finally possible and means something only because there is Being [...]. (1964/1968, p. 250)

Merleau-Ponty refers to the “amorphous” perceptual world in relation to painting as, “at bottom Being in Heidegger’s sense [...] which, apprehended by philosophy in its universality, appears as containing everything that will ever be said, and yet leaving us to create it [...]” (1964/1968, p. 170). If the word "flesh" is provocation for some empiricist psychologists, perhaps the word "Being" with its philosophical provenance is scandal to them. For its justification, beyond the way in which Merleau-Ponty refers to it, readers may refer to the work of the Swiss phenomenological psychiatrists Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss and to the work of the American existentialist psychologist Rollo May and others.

The Visible and Invisible

The distinction between visible and invisible in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is not a dichotomy. The invisible inheres in the visible. Chiasm effects the context of the intertwining of the visible and invisible as it does the context of the intertwining of touching and being touched, which is – see above – the antecedent of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of flesh.

The "otherness" of the invisible to the visible cannot suggest alterity, a state of being alien to the visible. The invisible abides in and is complement to the visible. Merleau-Ponty says, “Meaning is invisible, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (membrane), and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible, it appears only within it [...]” (1964/1968, p. 215).

Merleau-Ponty, moreover, declares of the "invisible" that, “it is the invisible of this world”, and that it is “that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being” (p. 151). The invisible here in Merleau-Ponty is not some arcanum. It is not some idealized repository of realities that is esoteric in character and philosophically Platonic in derivation. It is of this world.

The Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Metzger (1936/2006) discusses "visible and invisible forms" from the perceptual point of view. The discussion stimulates considerations of the visible and invisible in visual fields, the locus of Metzger’s investigations, in such manner that the one who is read in Merleau-Ponty cannot help but consider possibilities of an ontological dimension to it. Reference to contexts of naturalistic assumptions, of course, is obligatory. One of Metzger’s graphic illustrations for points on "visible and invisible forms" is the "ambiguous figure" so familiar to psychologists. In that phenomenon of figure-rivalry, the alternative potential figure
dwell in a "formless intermediate space" until there is a required suppression of the incumbent figure that allows the alternative to "figure" in the visual field. Metzger’s descriptions and language at the perceptual level here tease speculation on correlations with Merleau-Ponty’s visible and invisible – again, with respect for differences of philosophical assumptions.

They also suggest a bridging of Merleau-Ponty’s ontological conceptions to the praxis of painters in their studios standing before the challenge of the easel – the challenge of the invisible. The study of a connection here requires respect for the distinctions between that which is perceptual and that which is ontological – at the same time that one awaits the occasioning of the ontological through perceptual experiencing.

Flesh and the Visible and Invisible in Relationship to Art

Merleau-Ponty says, “to the flesh – the invisible structure can be understood only through its relation to logos, speech – the invisible meaning is the inner framework of speech […]” (1964/1968, p. 224). The invisible becomes present to flesh through the vehicle of “logos, speech”. Merleau-Ponty also refers to a “Logos of lines” (1993b, p. 142). One may say that Merleau-Ponty acknowledges art as a logos – at least as a kind of speech. He says, “[…] painting speaks in its own way” (1993c, p. 84). In further advocacy of painting, Merleau-Ponty declares, “writers must not underestimate the painter’s labor and study, that effort which is so like an effort of thought and which allows us to speak of a language of painting” (p. 92). Merleau-Ponty, moreover, refers to the legitimacy of treating painting as a language (p. 112). In a sense, “the privilege language enjoys over painting or the practices of life remains relative” (p. 115). In sum, the art of painting participates in the revelation of the meaning of the invisible to flesh.

Artists testify to the invisible and the visible. They do so sometimes with startlingly explicitness. Odilon Redon (1945) has declared, “my whole originality, therefore, consists in having made improbable beings live humanly according to the laws of the probable, by as far as possible putting the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible [italics added]” (p. 361).

Paul Klee (1945), an artist among the ones to whom Merleau-Ponty refers in “Eye and Mind” (1993b), has said, “one learns to look behind the façade, to grasp the root of things. One learns to recognize the undercurrents, the antecedents of the visible. One learns to dig down, to uncover, to find the cause, to analyze” (p. 444). To recognize the antecedents of the visible, the antecedents that are the invisible inherent in the visible. The artists Redon, Klee, and others through their art arrive at the invisible that has always been there. One may say that they have "created" it, but they have not created it ex nihilo. Priest (2003) says:

Painting is revelatory of being because it is a depiction of the visible which makes an awareness of the invisible possible. By construing painting as a kind of language addressed to being Merleau-Ponty is drawing attention not only to the fact that paintings are not painted ex nihilo, but also to his claim that the visible presupposes the invisible and the invisible presupposes the visible. (p. 219)

Redon and Klee’s testimony to the visible and the invisible undergoes specification in the considerations of line and its phenomenality in the visual arts. Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) offers us a starting point for these considerations. The invisible, he says, “is in the line of the visible, it
is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it (in filigree) […]” (p. 215). The line that the artist draws manifests the invisible’s meaning in its “coiling over on flesh”. The presentation of the invisible through its presence-ing to the visible is achieved by the artist who depicts, limns, and renders explicit the invisible in visible lines. The artist’s line participates in “a system of equivalences, a Logos of lines, of lighting, of colors, of reliefs, of masses – a nonconceptual presentation of universal Being” (Merleau-Ponty, 1993b, p. 142). The Logos of the artist’s line discloses Being graphically just as the Logos of speech communicates Being notionally. Merleau-Ponty a bit further on says eloquently:

Whether it be representational or nonrepresentational, the line is no longer a thing or an imitation of a thing. It is a certain disequilibrium contrived within the indifference of the white paper; it is a certain hollow opened up within the in-itself, a certain constitutive emptiness – an emptiness which, as Moore’s statues show decisively, sustains the supposed positivity of things. (1993b, p. 144)

Consciousness in the Psychology of Art

The default understanding of consciousness in our culture is cartesian. It is pervasive and laggard to philosophical history’s development from the time of Immanuel Kant. As phenomenologists point out, the cartesian sense communicates a "consciousness" that is container to variously filling thoughts, perceptions, images, memories, etc. This customary employment of the word "consciousness" is that consciousness is a subjectivity onto-itself, and that of which it is conscious is considered as reflecting an other-than-self objectivity. Phenomenologists’ understanding of the word "consciousness" differs from this.

Phenomenological philosophers and psychologists consider consciousness as an instance of "intentionality". Intentionality, a "tending toward", always assumes a "that" toward which there is the intending. Intentionality is relational. In his comments on intentionality for psychologists, Giorgi says (2009):

This being directed to other than itself on the part of subjectivity is what intentionality means, although reflectively, subjectivity can make aspects of itself an object of such directed activity. […] The intentional relation is the basis of meaning and so phenomenological psychological analyses seek a type of meaning as the basis for understanding psychological reality. This is in contrast to natural scientific psychology, which interprets psychological reality in terms of cause-effect relations. (p. 184)

In the above quotation, Giorgi situates for modern psychology the significance of intentionality and consciousness as phenomenologically understood. Consciousness, manifestation of intentionality and agent for meaning, is in a roster of philosophical thinking that is fundamentally different from that of cartesian thinking. Phenomenological psychologists who are familiar with the literature of Edmund Husserl and with Merleau-Ponty’s earlier Phénoménologie de la perception (1945) are conversant, of course, with "intentionality".
Some among them who are unread in *The visible and the invisible*, nevertheless, may be puzzled (although they should not be puzzled) by Merleau-Ponty’s statement in his “Working Notes” of *The visible and the invisible*, “there is no longer consciousness – projections – In itself or object” (1964/1968, p. 227). The puzzlement intensifies with Claude Lefort’s (1964/1968) statement that in *The visible and the invisible* Merleau-Ponty revisits his early analyses:

[…] in order to show that they acquire their full meaning only outside of a psychological interpretation, when they are enveloped in a new ontology. It alone can now ground their legitimacy […] by disclosing the impossibility of further maintaining the point of view of consciousness. (p. XXI)

Merleau-Ponty’s "move" of analyses from out of psychological interpretation to the new ontology of *The visible and the invisible* that involves the seeming retirement of consciousness raises questions such as, “Where is intentionality in this ontology, and how does intentionality thereby enact in the lifeworld?”

Lingis (1986) ratchets up the radicalism of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of intentionality in his ontology of flesh. Lingis says that Merleau-Ponty, “transposed the format of intentionality into the essence of corporeity; intentional analysis now […] [operates] within a philosophy of nature where consciousness itself is produced by an "overlapping" of nature [cf. flesh] upon itself”. “Intentionality”, Lingis continues, “which for Husserl was a transcending of the sensible […] Merleau-Ponty reformulates as a power of the sensible” (p. 31).

Has there been, indeed, the retirement of consciousness? Merleau-Ponty says that his new ontology discloses how, “it was meaningless to thus realize the consciousness before the consciousness” (1964/1968, pp. 250-251). That is, it is meaningless to posit a consciousness and that of which it is conscious (cf. psychology) before a foundational consciousness or intentionality that is primordial to and embracing of transcendent posittings (cf. ontology). Foundational consciousness is not retired. Intentionality for Merleau-Ponty, as Lingis says, is reformed as “a power of the sensible”. Merleau-Ponty has repurposed the designations of intentionality and consciousness in a thematically and more explicitly ontological direction.

Barbaras (2004) points out that,

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology proceeds entirely from the decision to reconceive intentionality as an originary "reality", to recognize the irreducible and in some way unreadable character of the intentional fabric. […] Intentionality rejects a type of analysis that tries to undo it in order to reconstruct it, to rediscover in it a unity starting from a prior duality. In other words, for Merleau-Ponty the issue is one of understanding intentionality as being through the notion of flesh. (p. 170)

Flesh as understood by Merleau-Ponty surmounts the intentionality of consciousness that Husserl had tried to reconstitute from the “duality of matter and form” (Barbaras, 2004, p. 170).

The re-presentation of intentionality as the intentional fabric of flesh in *The visible and the invisible* does not bespeak a rupture in the conceptual development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought from *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) to *The visible and the invisible* (1964/1968).
Merleau-Ponty declares a commonality of thread between the ontology of *The visible and the invisible* and that before it:

I must show that what one might consider to be "psychology" (*Phenomenology of Perception*) is in fact ontology. Do so by showing that the being of science [which includes, of course, the science of psychology] can neither be nor be thought as selbständig. (1964/1968, p. 176)

Merleau-Ponty declares here that psychology has, at the very least, an intimate relationship to ontology that is both subtle and complicated. Psychology then, in this context, is the study of the Being of the human being. Merleau-Ponty says further, “results of Ph.P. [Phénoménologie de la perception] – Necessity of bringing them to ontological explicitation” (1964/1968, p. 183). Dillon addresses this continuing thread in Merleau-Ponty’s work.

[… the thesis of the primacy of phenomena which grounds the implicit ontology of the Phenomenology [of Perception] culminates in the doctrine of the element of flesh wherein the term "flesh" occupies in the explicit ontology of *The Visible and the Invisible* the same conceptual space as the term "phenomenon" (or "Gestalt") occupied in the earlier work. "Phenomenon", "Gestalt", and "flesh" name the same fundamental reality: the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence (p. 174).

For Dillon, flesh has been implicitly present in *Phenomenology of Perception*’s reference to "phenomenon" ("Gestalt") and it is articulated explicitly in *The visible and the invisible*. Intentionality (and the operations of consciousness) is now ontologically presented as the “power of the sensible”, as Lingis says. It inheres in sentient flesh. Consciousness is not repudiated. Merleau-Ponty professes Being as the place of consciousness in ontology. “Being is the "place" where the "modes of consciousness" are inscribed as structurations of Being […] and where the structurations of Being are modes of consciousness” (1964/1968, p. 253).

It is the argument of this essay from all of this that what is occurring at the psychological level of consciousness and its discourse is at that moment an occurrence at the ontological level as it is presented in *The visible and the invisible*. Reflection on this concurrence suggests that the making and the aesthetic experiencing of art encompass ontological simultaneities. Some may impute to the above thoughts a conflation of the psychological and the ontological. The differentiation between the two rests in their levels of discourse. The experiencing of art is both psychologically addressable and ontologically referable.

In all of this, three lines of development have so far been presented. The first is that of Merleau-Ponty’s development of an explicitly ontological significance to touch that he terms flesh from the antecedent of Husserl’s discussion of the phenomenon of touch. The second line of development is within the chronology of Merleau-Ponty’s own work as outlined by Dillon above: from the implicit ontology of phenomenon (or Gestalt) in *Phénoménologie de la perception* to its explicit ontological characterization as flesh in *The visible and the invisible*. The third line of development is Merleau-Ponty’s repurposing of the designation of consciousness from Husserl’s
phenomenology of it to an understanding of its modes as "structurations of Being" and the intentionality of consciousness as the intentional fabric of flesh.

For the phenomenological psychologist of art informed by Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, transfigurations of Being in the ontological dimensions of flesh and its visible and invisible that are effected by artistic and aesthetic experiences signify psychological consequences. Just as these transfigurations of Being are the purpose of art in its ontological articulation, the purpose of art in its psychological expression is "the mission of art" that is defined by Ó Cluanáin (1979) as:

[…] the propaedeutics of perception for a more authentic living of life. That is to say, the perceptual experience of art returns the viewer or listener to a Lebenswelt which is now perceptually experienced as illuminated with significances formerly inapparent or obscure – and this "return" motivates the person toward a more authentic living. (p. 245)

Imagination and Physiognomy in the Psychology of Art

With Merleau-Ponty’s repurposing of the designations of intentionality and consciousness, what are the dynamics of the artistic experiences and aesthetic experiences at the psychological level in its mission of art that may resonate at the ontological level for re-structurings of Being? Philosophical reflections and psychological investigations disclose that imagination is a key player here. It is proposed, furthermore, that physiognomy is its theatre of activity.

Imagination

Imagination is the executive partner with perception in making art and in experiencing art. It empowers perception to reach beyond its limits. In the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s languaging, imagination enables vision to fathom the invisible that is inherent in the visible.

Imagination, Kearney (1991) says, is dialogical in character. It is not a "free agent"; it is not autonomous in agency. One does not "just imagine". Kearney says:

The imagination addresses an invisible meaning in the visible world and the world responds only because both participate in a common core of Being. It is precisely because of this cognate genesis that imagination may serve as an agent of creative dialogue rather than monologue […] imagination is dialogical. (p. 115)

The dialogue is concrete and it may be difficult. Anyone who makes art is working with a material medium; e.g.; canvas and pigments, stone and sculpting tool, musical sound and its instrumentation, or word sounds and representations with their combinations. The medium resists the "making" done to it by the artist. Imagination has to deal with that perceptually experienced resistance. Imagination’s efforts may be frustrated, fulfilled, or "in process". Imagination never, however, lofts independently from perception into an artistic activity that seeks to exact a total obedience from the medium's materiality. It is in dialogue with the visibility of its medium and with that medium's material resistance. Tacitly, the goal is to focus on arriving at the invisible.
Amedeo Giorgi (1987) in his discussion of the psychology of imagination presents participant experiential reports with respect to the imaginational process. Giorgi analyzed those descriptive reports of the participant artist according to the phenomenological psychological method that he has developed over the years since the latter part of the 1960’s (e.g., 1985, 2009). He quotes an artist participant in his study, whose goal was to depict the "ideal cat".

I have to kind of sit back and let the ideas, the images, the figures, kind of flow out. Like I said, it’s like giving myself over to it. I have to get out of the way [...] new images [...] just sort of come if I’m looking at the paper in the right way [...] all else just kind of falls to the wayside. I’m just there. It’s a great feeling, you know. (p. 31)

Giorgi comments, “it seems that the role of imagination is to bring to presence in consciousness whatever is not directly perceivable or actually given in any other way. [...] for the creative type [the artist], the various images he gets helps him to become clearer about his guiding idea”. He adds, “the succession of presences helps the painter to achieve an artistic object” (1987, p. 38). Giorgi continues:

[...] it is the meaningful relationship between present reality and the imagined events that helps us to understand the specifics of the imagined events. The reality lacks are fulfilled by the irreal presences of the imagination, and these presences are psychologically meaningfully related to the gaps in reality. (p. 41)

“Various images” and “the succession of presences” are the configurations drawn from the artistic media and their respective material resistances. “Present reality” is the point of departure for the dialogue between imagination and its perceptually experienced medium. “Reality lacks are fulfilled by the irreal presences of the imagination.” In the ontology of Merleau-Ponty, one would say that lacks within the visible are fulfilled by the inherent invisible that is elicited by the artistic activity with the assistance of the imagination. The dynamic of dialogue is explicit here.

Introductory to his phenomenological psychological analysis of the results obtained in his investigation, Giorgi had presented a phenomenological philosophical context for his position that “the key to understanding the phenomenological approach to imagination is to understand that the image is a modality of consciousness” (p. 23). The philosophers to whom he referred in his investigation were Jean-Paul Sartre, Edmund Husserl, and Edward Casey. Giorgi did not refer to Merleau-Ponty in his 1987 investigation. The essay being presented here extends the psychology of imagination as Giorgi has studied it to relationship with Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on flesh and the visible and the invisible. The writer of this essay believes that the extension is consonant to Giorgi’s 1987 study.

In the discussion of the results of his study of the psychology of imagination, Giorgi says, “overall, it seems that the role of imagination is to bring to presence in consciousness whatever is not directly perceivable or actually given in any other way [...]” (1987, p. 38). In the context of Merleau-Ponty’s new ontology, “whatever is not directly perceivable or actually given in any other way is candidate for the visible’s invisible”. The artist initiates the artistic process through commitment to it. The implementation of the commitment, however, takes on “a life of its own".
The artist does not control the situation. “[The artist] was responding to a noematic discovery; he was not in control” (Giorgi, 1987, p. 42).

The art-making forays of the artist are at the psychological level. The artist with learned skills engages the material and its resistances. Imagination associates with the involved perceptual processes. Perception by itself, no matter how focused on art-making, is inadequate to the task. Imagination in relationship to perception is neither simplistically a "tag on" nor is it, within a reductionist perspective, some kind of "gesture" exercised by perception. Imagination, with perception, is the enabler of artistic activity and of aesthetic concurrence. At the philosophical ontological level, then, the artist’s efforts importune the invisible to disclose itself through the medium in which the artist is working.

With respect to aesthetic imagination, it is guided by the artistic imagination that has been accomplished in the work of art. The clearest evocation of this is reported by Giorgi (1987) from one of the participants in his study:

> When I say "caught", I kind of mean, something helped me imagine this scene, to think about it. Something about the picture called me to imagine, something about the season, and the possibilities of winter called me, kind of spoke to me, like prompting me to imagine. They like helped stimulate my imagination, would be another way of saying it. (p. 34)

In this case, the photographer’s caught image of the participant and his wife skiing, not necessarily artistic but available as example of a finished exercise of imagination (through composition, control of lighting, angle, etc.) and suggestive of artistic image, has called to the participant's imagination. In aesthetic experience, the imagination of the experiencer responds to this call and it is in perceptual tandem to the artistic imagination that has been enacted in the completed work of art. Ó Cluáinín (1987) points out, “imagination [that is aesthetic] is subsequent to and contingent upon the perception of the work of art” (p. 86). With attention to Rudolf Arnheim’s (1966) careful and rigorous treatment of the perceptual character of the aesthetic experience, Ó Cluáinín (1987) says that in the aesthetic experience, “imagination is directed and fulfilled through the structure(s) of the perceived work of art” (p. 97). Imagination that wanders from that structure(s) is withdrawing from the aesthetic experience. Subsequent to the aesthetic experience, imagination stirred by the aesthetic experience may range wherever it will. In the case of the participant in Giorgi’s study, his imagination then wandered after having been caught by the photograph. He “began to imagine the coming ski season” (1987, p. 34).

This is an important point. Casey seems to suggest that in the aesthetic experience of art, especially in theatre, we have an extension of aesthetic experience, “from its initial perceptual basis […] onto an imaginative plane” (1976, p. 140). This is a compromise of the primacy and authority of the work of art. As it has been said above, “the imagination of the experiencer is in tandem to the artistic imagination that has been enacted in the completed work of art”. This is within the perceptual experience of the work of art. Experience of a work of art exits from aesthetic experience proper when the experiencer’s imagination exceeds the boundaries of the artistically enacted imagination in the work of art. “The receptivity of aesthetic imagination […] requires a "hold" on the ordinary imagination” (Ó Cluáinín, p. 106). Post-aesthetic imagination, despite its own authority and validity, is adventitious to aesthetic imagination.
Physiognomy

Earlier in this essay it was said that,  

The non-dualist difference between the flesh of the world and the flesh of the body (body understood as embodied subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty’s *le corps propre*), however, is a difference of differentiating distinction and not the difference between metaphysical realities in exclusion of each other.

A concept facilitative of the appreciation of Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between "flesh of the world" and "flesh of the body" is that of physiognomy. Physiognomy interfaces embodied subjectivity and nature with each other; it interfaces flesh of the body and flesh of the world with each other. It is a kind of pellicle utterly porous and transparent through which embodied subjectivity and nature open to each other and intertwine. It is with risk that the word pellicle is offered here – positivist reifications could subvert the metaphoric character of the word as it is offered in this understanding of physiognomy. I define physiognomy as (2005):

[...] the specification of expression. It is the structural specification of the phenomenon in its expressiveness. Another way of saying it is that expressiveness characterizes all of nature both human and physical, and that physiognomy reflects the structural differentiation of expressiveness in the instantiations of nature. In this context, "expression" [or "expressiveness"] [...] is a general character of all phenomenal reality. This position emerges from reflection both on the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty in his phenomenological review of expressiveness and physiognomy, and also on the thoughts of Arnheim in his Gestaltist understanding of visual experience. (p. 220)

Further on, I say, “one can appreciate that analysis of works of art progresses through experience of the physiognomy [of them] and that that experience is not had by way of pieces, by way of visually sectioning the work. It is direct and immediate” (p. 233). Recognition of the "look", of the physiognomy, of whatever is before us is the recognition of kinship. Flesh coils over flesh. Embodied subjectivity, *le corps propre*, and Nature are reconciled to each other through interfacing physiognomy. The artist experiences this in the making of art. Reciprocally, the experiencer of the completed work of art is experiencing the reconciliation. Within that aesthetic experience, as I (1987) say, “perceptual embrace of the work of art [...] [is] the embrace that both contours itself totally to the physiognomy of the art in order to be informed by it, and also stands as the sufficient basis of the aesthetic experience” (p. 86). Specifically, in the "physiognomy" of the art there resides the enacted artistic imagination to which fits the experiencer's imagination.

Conclusion

The thesis of this essay has been, “that Merleau-Ponty’s presentation of "flesh and the visible and invisible" is the clearest ontological explication of the context within which artistic and
aesthetic experiences take place”. The achievement of that understanding of art’s ontology immediately distinguishes artistic and aesthetic experiences of art from the educational and assessment purposes of art appreciation. It is the position of this essay that Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on art’s ontology within a psychology of art clarify how genuine experiences of art institute psychological consequences for experiencers.

To understand how art instigates psychological – and ontological – consequences, there has to be consideration of Merleau-Ponty’s repurposing of the designations of intentionality and consciousness. This essay suggests that the engagement of the two levels of psychological discourse and ontological discourse clarifies the reciprocity and simultaneity between the psychological and ontological dimensions of artistic and aesthetic experiences. The experiencing of art is both psychologically addressable and ontologically referable. Lastly, imagination and physiognomy are constitutive of artistic and aesthetic experiences. All the above serve the "mission of the psychology of art": the re-direction of everyday living to more authentic living.

References


