

Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty: The Aesthetics of Difference

HENRY SOMERS-HALL, *University of Warwick*

The purposes of this paper are, first, to show the importance within Deleuze's aesthetics of the notion of the Gestalt, conceived as a figure against a background, and second to show that recognizing the importance of this notion leads to a sympathy for themes in the work of Merleau-Ponty. After showing the motivations for Merleau-Ponty's adoption of the concept of the Gestalt, and its application within *Eye and Mind*, I wish to show that despite the similarities in their analyses Merleau-Ponty's analysis is ultimately incapable of providing a complete description of the work of art.

Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy attempts to provide an ontological foundation for the Gestalt. "A figure on a background," Merleau-Ponty writes, "is the simplest sense-given available to us," and accordingly "is the very definition of the phenomenon of perception" (PP, 4). Traditional Gestalt psychology's grounding in the isomorphism between the results of modern physics and the structure of the organism must be seen as inadequate as it requires us to presuppose scientific ontology wholesale. Merleau-Ponty solves this problem of foundations by invoking the transcendental reduction. The bracketing of the natural attitude and the reduction of the world to a field of immanence enables us to construct a descriptive ontology which does not rely on the theoretical suppositions of general science. Husserl, however, follows the transcendental reduction with the eidetic reduction, a move that allows the study of the world as essence. Through the reduction phenomenology grants access to the flow of singularities before consciousness. These "matters of fact," according to Husserl, are inadequate to the founding of a pure science, and instead we need to seek the atemporal essence of the phenomenon, that which underlies it and encompasses "the entire *wesengehalt* of the phenomenon, from its largest generality down to its seemingly most innocuous differences" (TPD, 57). This is achieved through a monstrous and potentially infinite series of deformations of the object by the faculty of phantasy. This process does not destroy the identity found at the level of essence by showing the object to be a "heterogeneous multiplicity," but instead points to a deeper identity, a plane upon which the deformations take place marking the limits of the intelligibility of the deformations. Phantasy therefore defines the essence by providing the boundaries beyond which the object can no longer be grasped as such by consciousness. It reduces the heterogeneous multiplicity to a homo-

genous multiplicity (TPD, 59). This reliance on the underlying plane in order to produce identity cannot be used to define a self-identical essence, however, as the Gestalt is precisely the interplay between the figure and the ground. Any variation in the figure itself will cause reciprocal topological variations in the underlying field itself. Husserl's error is to fail to realize that the ground itself is a part of the figure. The process of individuation which creates objects necessarily draws them together into communities. The ground and figure are different in kind, but also, as is shown by the possibility of infinite regress, infinite reversibility prevents their reduction to a homogenous plane. This naturally reduces the power of the phenomenological method, and as Merleau-Ponty states, "since our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux on to which we are trying to seize, there is no thought which embraces all our thought" (PP, xiv).

Rather than discussing the extent to which Deleuze's criticisms of phenomenology apply to Merleau-Ponty's work, I wish to show the similarity between Deleuze's and Merleau-Ponty's thought in regard to the Gestalt and the work of art. While phenomenology must normally be seen as a science of the actual, Deleuze recognizes the possibility of Merleau-Ponty moving beyond this limitation in his later work, *Eye and Mind*. As Deleuze puts it, "Erwin Strauss, Merleau-Ponty, or Maldiney need Cezanne or Chinese painting" (WP, 149). Of course, such an analysis must begin at the level of the actual, as "Apollo, the clear-confused thinker, is needed in order to think the Ideas of Dionysus" (DR, 214). The difficulty lies in going beyond this language, to push our analysis to the level of the "closest noumenon," which is the level of the virtual. Such a movement, of course, is a break with classical phenomenology.

While in his early work Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of the Gestalt to characterize the actual, in *Eye and Mind* he attempts to move further to the point of actualization of the Gestalt itself. As he argues, the mutual dependence of things moves us towards the substitution of the space of dimensions for that of depth. Depth becomes the first dimension, if it can still be considered in terms of dimensions, as it is through depth that things maintain their independence through their relations with the field of objects that are around them. Merleau-Ponty's conception of depth here comes close to the Bergsonian conception of time. Depth is not a space in the conventional sense of a series of dimensions through which the movements of objects can be measured, but a place where relationships between objects as differential processes are formed. It is closer to the idea of a place where bodies come to be through their interrelations than a spatially extended area where objects can be moved around, measured, and compared with those about them. Things maintain themselves by the pushing forward and holding back of relations

with others things, thus prohibiting the isolation and analysis of any one from its milieu. This notion of depth, which is central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of Cezanne, maintains the idea of the Gestalt as a process. With Cezanne we find a study of perception that does not already presuppose the nature of that which allows perception to take place. Cezanne's suicide, "aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it," mirrors the move from Gestalt psychology to the *Phenomenology of Perception*; it is a recognition that the insights of impressionism require a revolution in order for their implications to be brought into the open (CD, 63). This revolution amounts to giving back to the world its weight as well as keeping the depth which the impressionists had found with its loss. Cezanne's realization is that "space must be shattered—the fruit bowl must be broken" (EM, 140). It is this breaking up of objective space that leads us to the origin of the Gestalt itself. This is the "deflagration of Being," the burning up of the visible, which aims at tearing a fissure in being precisely at the point between things themselves. Clearly, such an approach requires a move away from traditional painting techniques. Following Deleuze, we can say that Cezanne is searching for a certain virtuality within his work, an attempt to present "not some confused determination, but a completely determined structure formed by its genetic differential elements, its 'virtual' or 'embryonic' elements" (DR, 209). Cezanne's answer to this problem of finding a path to the root of being is a return to pure forms, forms which, "taken together, as traces or cross-sections of the thing, let it appear between them like a face in the reeds" (EM, 140). These cross sections must be understood in terms of the n -dimensional fields of the virtual, within which the real idea of the determined entity exists, different in kind from its actualized descendent. It is traces of these forces that are found within the middle period of Cezanne. In moving to the level of depth, we necessarily require a change in the language we use. Cezanne finds it necessary to put "Being's solidity on one side and its variety on the other" (EM, 140). We then find ourselves forced to use the two languages of Deleuze, the clear-confused (the language of the actual) and the obscure-distinct (pertaining to the virtual). Through this division, Cezanne hopes to create a double description of the object, one that encompasses both its virtual and actual tendencies.

Of course, the study of color itself will not get us to the heart of things. It is a breaking of the "skin of things," but the heart is "beyond the colour envelope just as it is beyond the space envelope" (EM, 141). The exploration of the thing through color is a form of trying to bring to expression that part of the virtual that "must be defined as strictly a part of the real object" (DR, 209). Merleau-Ponty is attempting to move beyond the world of perception to the conditions for the experience of

perception. What he is searching for is the origin of the Gestalt in that "relation between a perceiving body and a sensible ... and not perspectival world" (VI, 206). The intention is to penetrate beyond perception through perception, an intention that has clearly been taken up in the world of art, as shown by the ability of the artist to transpose his work from one field to another—an ability that shows that what the artist is attempting to grasp is not an aspect of perception but that which gives rise to the relation between the subject and the Gestalt. The move from Cezanne to Klee, and the emphasis on the line, clarifies this change of position. It is the line that "renders visible," not as the contour of the Gestalt (the line that is brought into existence at the same moment as the fusion of the figure with its horizon), but instead as the line that is the generating power of the Gestalt itself. Such a line is the "blueprint of the genesis of things." The attempt being made here is to paint the idea of the thing under consideration. The line curls itself through the different planes of the idea, mirroring the phase portrait of a system to such a degree that it is necessary to "leave it up to the title to designate by its prosaic name the entity thus constituted." In that Klee's painting "subtends the spatiality of a thing quite as much as a man or an apple tree," we are in a situation where the dimensionality of the painting no longer matters to the underlying content. While the multiplication of dimensions is necessarily replaced with the multiplication of lines, necessary to give the painting sensible form, the lines themselves attempt the task of putting forth the differential relations that hold beneath the painting itself. The factor that governs the nature of the lines within the work is that it is "the line's relation to itself ... [that] will form a meaning of the line." What Klee is trying to produce is a line that "is intrinsically defined, without reference to a uniform space in which it would be submerged." The line thus becomes the "complex theme" of an internal multiplicity which defines the actualized thing. It is an attempt to render visible that which is behind the visible. This explains Klee's statement that to give a generating axis of a man the painter "would have to have a network of lines so entangled that it could no longer be a question of a truly elementary representation." The work of Klee therefore seems to meet the criteria set up by Deleuze for the notion of an idea, which is at the heart of the language of the virtual. The first of these criteria is that of a lack of conceptual significance, the idea that an idea does not contain within itself its own meaning (thus allowing the idea to be actualized in different contexts). This criterion is met by the fact that the name becomes a necessary identifier of the work. Without the title, the work can no longer be seen to signify any thing in particular. It should be noted that the title of the work does not give meaning to the painting, however, but instead actualizes an indeterminate virtual meaning already

present (EM, 143). Second, the interrelation between elements must be intrinsically (not extrinsically) spatial. As we have seen from Merleau-Ponty's notion of depth, the thing can no longer be seen merely to reside in space, but instead draws space around it. The painting of the lines forms its own space, a space within depth that is necessarily composed by the juxtaposition of the lines themselves. The third criterion, that the Idea must be actualized in diverse spatio-temporal situations, which guarantees the nature of the idea as a structure, is met by the painting before it is given a name. The name of the painting delineates a path of actualization, ties it to one actualized state of affairs. This feature of the work is not integral to the painting itself, however. The latter requires a name on the basis that before it is thus determined its meaning is unknown because of its ability to be actualized in a variety of contexts.

We have seen how Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the work of art comes close to the recognition of the virtual. There is clearly something that is between, or behind, the actual differential structure of perception. There is the movement, in the analysis of the work of Cezanne, towards a division at the heart of language, a segregation of the clear-confused from the distinct-obscure. This division, however, is quickly rejected by Merleau-Ponty: "We must seek space and its content together" (EM, 143). It is here that we finally come to an understanding of the Deleuzian remark that "phenomenology is never more in need of ... a 'rigorous science' than when it invites us to renounce it" (WP, 149). Merleau-Ponty has made tremendous progress in the illumination of the actual, primarily through the breaking down of the conventional concept of space-time, and the recognition that the Gestalt is not its own foundation. The difficulty is that the notion of depth attempts to fulfil two functions. It attempts to explain the actualization of the Gestalt and also to explain the Gestalt as actualized. Accordingly, the two parts of the Gestalt, the virtual and the actual, become conflated. These two parts provide two radically different origins of Gestalt structure: first, through its actual origin, that is, the fact that a Gestalt naturally appears from an already existent Gestalt (a corollary of the fact that the Gestalt is the simplest unit of perception); second, through the origin of the Gestalt as the actualizing of an intertwining/integration of a pre-individual field of singularities. Merleau-Ponty's attempt to explain the virtual origin of the Gestalt figure is doomed to failure because the language of phenomenology forces him to describe this origin in terms of the actual. The virtual is sought between figures where one can only find other Gestalt structures. He reaches a stage where the Gestalt loses its stability and begins to break down, but such an analysis is still an analysis of the flesh. To move to the final level of analysis we need to give up searching between the Gestalt, at the point of the contour, for its origin. Instead,

what is necessary is that we move to a language at which the Gestalt itself is already broken, or rather, is yet to be formed. This is the level of the dissolved Gestalt, the Gestalt at or before the brink of corporeality. This is not to disregard Merleau-Ponty's work. It is not a flawed analysis of the virtual, and was never meant to be, but rather an analysis of the non-perspectival nature of the actual, of the flesh, that is the source of particular instantiations of the Gestalt within the world. What Merleau-Ponty found is the *function* through which the Gestalt of the flesh unravels its temporal structure. A complete analysis of perception, however, must take account of the work of Deleuze in *The Logic of Sensation*.

"Painting's eternal object," writes Deleuze, "is this: to paint forces" (WP, 182). This movement away from the actual gives us the opportunity to clarify the Gestalt's origin within the virtual. The move to the notion of force within art does not do away with the need to deal with the Gestalt. As we can see from the beginning of Deleuze's work on Francis Bacon, the Gestalt takes prominence in his work in the form of a circle which "often delimits the place where the person—that is to say, the figure—is seated, lying down, doubled over, or in some other position" (FB, 1). In the work of Deleuze, however, the Gestalt is in a constant mode of flight or of trying to get beyond itself. The depth of the background behind the figure is made to be as shallow as possible. The spasm—the trademark of Bacon—is seen by Deleuze as an attempt on the part of the flesh to "flow out of itself," to escape from its background. The effect of the attempt to escape the Gestalt is seen further in the flattening of the figure against the background, threatening to dissipate itself "like a lump of fat in a bowl of soup," or the final possibility, the disappearance of the figure in its entirety, leaving behind nothing but a trace of its former self (FB, xii). It is clear here that there is an effort to free art from the restrictions of the actual, to move beyond the Gestalt, but a move which purports to open up, through the remnants left on the canvas, the origin of the Gestalt. Thus, "neither the tactile-optical world nor the purely optical world are stopping points for Bacon" (FB, 136). The work of Bacon, furthermore concerning itself with the body, with contorted figures, gives Deleuze the possibility of forming a new critique of the work of Merleau-Ponty. Bacon's work makes explicit the theme of the flesh falling away from the bone, the theme that is at the heart of Deleuze's debate with Merleau-Ponty.

The painting of Bacon institutes two separate movements. First is the movement just described, the attempt at the dissolution of the Gestalt structure through a variety of methods which disrupt the field/figure relation. This movement, mirroring Merleau-Ponty's analysis, takes place at the point of the contour, that is, between the figure and its background. The contour also precipitates a second movement, that between

the material structure and the figure. This is the figure's attempt to escape through the contour itself, which is the recognition of a "vanishing point" within the Gestalt, where the figure, under "all the pressures of the body," attempts to escape from itself (FB, 16). Thus, within the body we find the root of a second exchange. This time the exchange becomes the source of an immobile movement, an "intense motionless effort" of the figure that is not in the realms of "the place, but rather of the event" (FB, 15). The dissolution of the Gestalt at the level of the actual necessarily opens up the possibility of reaching that which underlies the Gestalt. Thus, the collapse of the figure/background relation forces the figure to make a similar move, an effort to return to the pre-individual field which is its origin. This movement of "de-actualization" "releases the presences beneath representation" (FB, 52). These presences beneath representation cannot themselves be seen as spatial entities, even as entities within a field of depth. To do so would be to misconstrue the relation between the clear-confused and the distinct-obscure. "It ... is not the force which is sensed, since sensation 'gives' something completely different from the forces that condition it" (FB, 56). This means that the study of art becomes the attempt to see what precisely is not manifest within the painting. The collapse of the Gestalt, which simply leaves "traces" on the canvas, is this opening to the non-manifest. The dissipation of the figure goes "from the figure to the structure," a structure that is pre-individual, as individuation necessitates the formation of a Gestalt structure (FB, 33). Instead, these relations between the traces of forces on the canvas are differential relations. At the body's attempt to escape itself, and through the tension that swirls across the surface of the flesh, we arrive at the purely internal relations within color. These relations, however, give us everything. As this analysis is not far from Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Klee, we must understand what Deleuze wants to achieve by it. The key is Deleuze's comment that "flesh, however firm, descends from bones; it falls or tends to fall away from them" (FB, xi).

For Merleau-Ponty, the flesh is the element of the world. For Deleuze, we could perhaps define the world through the notion of force. It is for this reason that the work of architecture comes to prominence and why Cezanne, with his "world as nature," is Merleau-Ponty's signifier while Bacon, with his "world as artefact," signifies the philosophy of Deleuze. Deleuze is not rejecting the notion of the flesh, but instead is calling for the recognition that the element of the flesh is only the world seen under one of its aspects. There is a coexistence of flesh and bone, the one residing within the other. The bone is therefore that which shows itself in the work of art which is not flesh, but it necessarily coexists with the flesh and provides the flesh with its structure. This notion is the virtual,

that which provides the structure to the actual/flesh/Gestalt. The link between bone and the virtual becomes explicit in a passage from *What is Philosophy?*: "The second element is not so much bone or skeletal structure as house or framework" (WP, 179). Here, then, is a clarification of the fact that flesh retains its position, for Deleuze, as well as a reference to the true nature of bone. The notion of bone as found in Bacon is here tied to the notion of architecture, a play of and with forces. The human flesh of Bacon recedes and dissolves itself, revealing the virtual structure that supported it. Beneath the flesh is not bone but force.

We must now ask how this relates to what we have said of Merleau-Ponty. The difficulty is that there are two languages at play within philosophy, one that deals with the level of the actual, with phenomena as they are given to us (the level of the clear-confused), and the other that deals with the virtual. This second level is the level of the distinct-obscure, a level where the Gestalt is yet to be formed and where description takes the form of the analysis of a field of forces. This is the level of the shattered space of Cezanne, of the fragmented Gestalt where the foreground and background dissolve into one another. The languages cannot be confused with each other, for to do so would be to risk conflating these two aspects of the Gestalt. This would lead to a consideration of the virtual in terms of the actual and to a perpetuation of the Gestalt beyond its proper place. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty ultimately rejects Cezanne's solution, arguing that we need to "seek space and content together" (EM, 140). Once this statement is accepted, the possibility of an analysis of perception traversing the virtual is cut away from us. It is true that at the level of the actual the Gestalt cannot be separated from the space it itself forms, from the planes that radiate out from it; but such an analysis can only move us half way towards the nature of the differential structures. The other half of the enquiry does not take place, as Merleau-Ponty recommends, between the figures, but instead at the point where the figure dissolves itself, where the contour starts to fall apart, and where we see traces of that which is behind the Gestalt.

H.T.Somers-Hall@warwick.ac.uk

Works Cited

Beistegui, M. "Toward a Phenomenology of Difference?", *Research in Phenomenology* 30, 2000. Cited as TPD.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. London: Athlone Press, 1994. Cited as DR.

———. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel Smith. London: Continuum, 1992. Cited as FB.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson. London: Verso, 1994. Cited as WP.

Johnson, G. Ed. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Cezanne's Doubt*. In G. Johnson, 1993. Cited as CD.

———. *Eye and Mind*. In G. Johnson, 1993. Cited as EM.

———. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962. Cited as PP.

———. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968. Cited as VI.