

## **EXPERIENCING INTERIORS: OCULARCENTRISM AND MERLEAU-PONTY'S REDEEMING OF THE ROLE OF VISION .**

By Dr Isis Brook

*Published 2002 in the Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology 33:1, 68-77.*

### **Introduction**

Ocularcentrism is the term used to express the emphasis that Western culture places on the visual sense. The claim is not just that we tend to use our eyes more than other senses, but that we value knowledge gained through the visual sense more than that gained by hearing, smell, touch and the kinaesthetic sense. An additional feature of the concept is that this valuing of sight has determined the way we understand knowledge, and what counts as knowledge, as that which can be construed visually. Indeed our terminology for thoughts, concepts, and ideas uses visual metaphors<sup>1</sup>. We see, we have insights, we speculate and this style of thinking will of course have an impact on what we look for and the kinds of evidence we accept as yielding knowledge. I will briefly outline some of the historical and conceptual pointers to the idea of ocularcentrism. This will provide a framework within which to examine a statement by Walter Ong about the propensity to turn all that is seen into surfaces - even interiors. Ong's critique extends to what he sees as a necessary superficialising of our encounters with the world, and each other, through the tying of abstract visualism to our idea of reality. I will explore three examples of encounters with interiors which will underline our usual visual dominance and experiment with giving attention to the other senses for a more rounded account of the experience. The examples will then be used to explicate two aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. One, the experience of our being "caught in the fabric of the world", and two, the possibilities of a reappraisal of the visual, in its experienced form, as including depth, colour and communication with the other senses.

### **A brief history of ocularcentrism and the eliding of the other senses**

Some writers have attempted to place a definitive historical description on the rise of this phenomenon and various landmarks in the history of ideas are proposed as markers of its origins, progress, ascendancy and decline. Crucial to the story is the Greek treatment of the senses as secondary to reason. Though a poor cousin, sight is likened to reason by both Plato and Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> For some commentators sight is toppled from this early pre-eminence in the middle ages. The senses as a whole move from being seen as distracting and rather too connected to our animality to being positively misleading. Sight, far from being clear, is fraught with dangerous illusions and it is hearing and smell that can lend a greater veracity to experience.<sup>3</sup> However, with the movement away from monastic asceticism towards a burgeoning science sight achieves, not just its former status as noblest sense, but a new apogee.

Galileo's mathematisation of the world is, of course, an important landmark in the development of the status of sight. His division of qualities of objects into primary and secondary such that only mass, motion and magnitude are measurable and

therefore relevant gives sight a special status. It should be noted that colour and depth perception are cast aside along with the other senses as subjective. The division of the phenomena of the world into primary and secondary qualities is formally consolidated in Locke where the secondary qualities are understood as the action of the primary qualities on the senses and not part of the object,<sup>4</sup> although the senses, for Locke, are a source of knowledge.

Descartes' role in both the denigration of the senses and the rise of ocularcentrism is also complex. His cogito rests on the thought experiment where he says:

I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses<sup>5</sup>

But his lauding of sight in the service of science in his *Dioptric* is clear. The Cartesian mind (particularly the Lockian interpretation of that mind) that observes the world on an internal screen and the necessary modelling of thought on sight is the culmination of the Enlightenment project. Taste, important in the Enlightenment, becomes aesthetic not gustatory. Thus the sense is removed from its apparent animality whilst retaining its judgmental capacity. Smell, far from yielding certain knowledge, becomes something to be avoided. Turning away from smells and the deoderization of public spaces has been tied to the rise of consciousness of an individual self<sup>6</sup>. It seems that once we are no longer a mass, but able to see the other as other their smell becomes offensive.

Now we 'believe what we see', whereas what we hear is 'hearsay'. However, olfaction retains in popular speech something of its medieval veracity. In cases of instinctive suspicion that things are not as they appear we 'smell a rat' or declare that there is 'something fishy' about it.

With the other senses left to their own spheres (spheres of decreasing size due to the epistemological pre-eminence of sight) the visual is left to tell us about the world. However, the acclaimed visual is not the visual as we experience it, but a one eyed, colour-blind sense that is stripped of both depth and colour perception. If sight is, by analogy, the sense of thought then the missing dimension of depth can, by analogy, be linked to meaning. The brief overview above is no more than orientation to prepare the ground for reflection on the way the visual sense fails to deal adequately with one particular aspect of the world. For a thorough treatment of the rise of the visual and its being called into question I refer the reader to Martin Jay's Downcast Eyes.

### **Surfaces and interiors: the proposition**

Walter Ong gives this movement to sight far reaching consequences in the construction of Western culture. His historical analysis places the movement into sight and the inevitable denigration of the oral/aural aspects of culture with the development of the alphabet and the abstraction that a symbol system entails. He says of its inadequacies:

Sight reveals only the surfaces. It can never get to an interior as an interior but must always treat it as somehow an exterior. If understanding is conceived by analogy with sight alone...understanding is ipso facto condemned to dealing with surfaces which have a 'beyond' it can never attain to.<sup>7</sup>

I will take three examples that share a focus on interiority of different kinds in an attempt to show the inability of sight alone to deal with interiors and the degree to which attention to the other senses can help to reconstitute the interiority of the experience. These examples are a source of reflection on Ong's idea and suggest what it would mean for it to be the case that the eye traps us into superficial encounters with the world.

### **Architectural interiors**

I will take as an example here a church, and discuss the difference between the interior and exterior to shed some light on what might be distinctive about the interior which sight cannot access and of which sight is possibly impeding our experience.

Imagine a cathedral in the distance. We approach the cathedral and see its tall pillars and the arched doorway. Let us stop for a moment and survey the scene, it seems natural to do so. The planes we view describe its style of architecture and its placing in the landscape is spread out before us. If we enter the cathedral we become contained inside, we are standing on the other side of the surfaces just observed and because of their configuration they form an interior space which now contains us. The transition from outside to inside does not necessarily constitute a change in the way we approach the world and so the inside walls can be, through our gaze, turned into surfaces as well. And in fact if one observes visitors to cathedrals they can appear to be extraordinarily visual centred. They have come to see this or that structure, this or that carving, tomb, window, or artefact. They may even be on a guided tour that helps to direct their gaze to the relevant objects and will perhaps soon depart for the next stop on their sightseeing tour.

How might it be different? If we chose as the focus of our experience the interiority of the cathedral, to know it as an interior, we would not want to concentrate on the appearance of things. This would, according to Ong's idea, make the interior another surface and thereby deny its interiority. If instead we try attending to the non-visual senses the movement from outside to inside does reveal a very strong sense of interiority. The effect of the weather - sun, wind or rain abates, possibly causing us to relax our facial muscles and shrug off tension around our shoulders. Our footsteps resound back instead of disappearing - the tone changes and draws our attention to the texture and substance of the floor, ringing stone slabs, muffling carpet and the strange metallic echo of grating. Suddenly we can smell, instead of momentary things, usually unpleasant, carried by the wind, a continuous odour now invades us. It may shift and change as we move about perhaps interrupted by the smell of a wet mackintosh passing or emanations from a musty corner then flowers - rich at first then cloying. The smell lends substance to the space. Moving around the space we may notice our bodies feel their way into

special configurations of this space: this area feels comfortable and my steps slow down, my breathing deepens; this area lifts me I am forced to stand tall and am exhilarated, my breath is shortened or its rhythm is interrupted. Here the space feels dense and closes in, my head sinks into my shoulders and I hurry through seeking release. Some areas are cool others warm and occasionally a definite sense of heat emanating at ankle height. The smooth marble of tombs is cold, the stone not so immediately cold, but damp. The wood is smooth with age and warmer inviting exploration.

Having given the other senses a chance to inform us of the interior we can use sight to add a further dimension to that understanding. The light falling from coloured glass striping the air and spotting the walls with patches of blue and purple, green and yellow. The arches rising and falling in a rhythm and sturdy pillars marking configurations of space. Perhaps the eye can take part in interiority. But the eye rampant -in its dominant mode - will be drawn to presenting the world as surfaces and drawing us to the appearance of things rather than attending to the quality of spaces and our bodily interaction with the world.

### **Bodily Interiors**

A stark example of the attempt to see interiors and in the process make them exterior is in surgery. Here the body is opened and its 'true' state, advancement of disease for example, is only then seen. But what is seen is no longer interior it becomes, by virtue of the surgeons knife, an external surface.

Developments in medicine could be viewed as an exacting search for the mechanisms by which it would be possible to see the interior as an interior. Key hole surgery, endoscopy, ultra sound, and cat scans all attempt to give the physician access to the interior regions of the body and render them visible either via video as in endoscopy or as symbolic representations. Here is not the place to pass judgement on the medical benefit of these procedures, but to use them as examples of what happens when we try to see the interior of the body.

With these developments in medicine one is drawn to wonder what other faculties are being ignored or demoted with this striving to make the interior visible. Quite apart from asking the patient to describe how they feel 'inside', the traditional diagnostic methods of listening to the chest, breathing, and voice are perhaps being forgotten. Feeling the pulse could be used as another example. Presumably a sensor could be used to measure the pulse and relay this to a graph which the doctor could see at a glance. However, when taking the pulse manually the doctor can also feel the warmth and texture of the skin, the degree of tension in the muscles, the extent to which the patient is comfortable about being touched and generally get a feel for who the patient is as a person. The physical procedure requires that the two people, the doctor and patient, have to inhabit the same time and place - the procedure demand proximity. Perhaps their breathing becomes synchronised and the doctor can gain a feel for the patient's condition as well as the simple expression of caring that is facilitated by their contact.

There are possibly many dimensions of this that could be explored, but the key point for the purpose in hand is that the knowledge of the interior state gained (in all the senses of interior) via the other senses is different from that of simply making the interior visible. Even without the intrusion of the surgeon's knife, the interior viewed on a screen or recorded in slices does seem to turn the interior into surfaces.

### **Cross-sections**

The third area of experience where I want to test Ong's proposition - that the visual denies interiority by conversion of interiors to surfaces - is that of diagrams. Diagrams are in general symbolic in the sense that they do not attempt to represent real appearance, but a stripped down, simplified version of a thing. If the visual appearance of the thing were not complex and displaying extraneous (for the purpose in hand) detail then there would be no need of the diagram. However, I suspect that some conventions of the 'diagrammatic world' do deny that which its efforts attempt to explain. The convention I will question here is the cross section. This is where the form and function of a thing is explained by showing it as cut in half and displaying to sight the inner workings. If we take the cylinder of an internal combustion engine as an example Ong's critique is beautifully demonstrated. The crucial aspect of the cylinder is its closedness - the combustion has to take place in a closed space for the controlled force to have the right effect. In diagrams the cylinder is shown as open, its interior open to view and sometimes even the flash of the explosion is depicted as crossing the edges of the casing. Here the conventions of diagrammatic representation of 'explosion' have taken precedence over the importance of showing that the explosion is contained. Thus the crucial integrity of the interiority of the cylinder is broken open and its interior becomes surface and space rather than contained potential pressure. The heat, the shudder, and the muffled thump is lost. As with the medical examples I am not claiming that this is necessarily detrimental only that by drawing attention to it we could examine the way it may be approached by other means.

In the piston example it is the inaccuracy of depicting an unseen mechanical process that is drawn out. Another type of cross section could be examined to draw attention to other features of this showing/denying phenomenon of the diagrammatic world. For this I will use the example of the cross section of a ship, in fact an ocean liner of the exuberance class. Here the cross section demonstrates to the passenger the layout of the ship. It gives an accurate picture of the size and position of the various rooms on board. However, in terms of the experience of being in the various rooms it is completely inaccurate and in fact denies the very features it is attempting to explain, i.e., the self-contained world of luxury that the passenger is anticipating experiencing. The diagram shows, for example, the ballroom and the boiler room in one glance. Everything about the experience of the interior of the ballroom is thus undermined. All the effort at interior design is to make this a lavish ballroom of proportions inconceivable on a ship. The experience of the space is large but somehow intimate. We experience the sumptuous fittings, the lush colours, the gleam of silver and lustre of candlelight, we hear the clinking of glass, the swish of ball gowns, the air is spiced with an aroma of exotic cocktails, perfume and warm bodies. The open floor of warm polished wood invites

movement. Being three levels up and one to the left of the boiler room is not integral to the interior of the ballroom in fact it seems to deny the very experience of the interior as a temple of sensuous experience. In showing the inside of the ship the cross section denies the very insularity and integrity of experience that the individual interiors have sought to maintain.

### Summary of examples

The interiors of the cathedral, the body, the cylinder and the ship present various problems for sight. Either they are just not available or our ocularcentric approach somehow misses the interiority even when we can put ourselves inside them. As Ong suggests, we turn their interiority into surfaces by approaching them first and foremost as presentations laid out before our gaze. The examination of cross-sections shows how that laying out becomes embedded in how we understand things. The prevalence of these types of illustrations in childrens' books and educational texts is suggestive of the cross-section type diagram as itself a simplified emblem of ocularcentrism as both symptom and cause of our twentieth century way of approaching the world. The world they represent is given to us mediated by explanation and instruction, but it is not the world we experience. Focusing on the other senses, the way we can and sometimes do use them, presents the interiors in a way it could be argued is closer to them as given<sup>8</sup>. That is, the encounter with interiors in the world which carries a veracity to the experience and to the interiors themselves.

Something that emerged from the experience in the cathedral was a sense of the interior space not being just empty space. Smell and sound are particularly active in presenting space as filled or shaped in some tangible way. Whilst the eye tends to focus ahead these other senses trigger an awareness of being surrounded - of the world being behind as well as in front of me. In the ballroom the attempts to create a certain atmosphere underline the extent to which ambience is a tangible entity and one not created purely by appearance. The tangibility of smell as well as our inability to remain distanced from it is often used in rituals where the sense of a surrounding presence or an intense communality are sought.

David Howes, in writing about the relationship between olfaction and mystical states, draws on anthropological and physiological studies to explain something of the relationship. On the use of smell to create communality in a ritual he says:

For as Largey and Watson (1972: 1032) have argued, the burning of incense creates an 'inter-subjective we-feeling' among the participants in a rite as each is forced to introject particles of the odour. One cannot not participate in the effervescence (or fellow-feeling) of the situation, because it participates in *you*.<sup>9</sup>

It is not always easy to describe the sensations, memories, and emotions triggered by smells. This problem with rational explanation of sensations is sometimes explained physiologically<sup>10</sup>, but the problem is itself quite striking. The experience is there and is often quite powerful and yet its description is difficult or would be if the very difficulty itself was not so recognisable to others.

Nevertheless the tangibility of space and the sense that particular interior spaces have a character of which their interiority is a crucial aspect is brought into focus by placing attention on the sounds, smells, tastes and kinaesthetic responses that arise from experiencing them. This has a striking impact on the experience of space because it becomes thickened and as potentially meaningful as the objects it was previously seen as separating. The world thus attended to is experienced like the world of which Merleau-Ponty speaks.

### **Experiencing the world as Flesh**

Central to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is the collapsing of the mind body dichotomy, and thus he says:

That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. ...This initial paradox cannot but produce others. Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or a prolongation of itself; they are encrusted in its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body.<sup>11</sup>

Merleau-Ponty comes at this problem and expresses it in many ways although an opacity remains. In 'The Intertwining - The Chiasm' the metaphors pile up as he tries to express what it is for the body to be a "remarkable variant" of the stuff of the world- "a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being". He describes the sensible sentient (human) aspect of being and to get across the idea of layerings and foldings of depth below surfaces he speaks of "a cross section upon a massive being"<sup>12</sup>.

The difficulty of expression arises not, I think, from a problem with the idea, but with a problem of thinking the idea or seeing the world like this. Our language and our modes of thinking are still closely tied to the Cartesian dualism which the expressions in Merleau-Ponty's writings are trying so hard to get round.

The misreadings and the struggle with expressing this idea are strangely reminiscent of Descartes' own writings. This can be seen in the difficulties Descartes' contemporaries had with understanding his idea of a firm subject/object split. The scholastic idea of the sun was the mind partaking of something of the sun, but Descartes was saying that the idea 'sun' was a separate (unextended) entity viewed by the mind. As he repeats again and again objective being simply means "being in the intellect in the way in which its objects are normally there"<sup>13</sup>. From Johan de Kater's objection, to which this is the response, one gets the feeling that it was not entirely "normal" for objects to be *in* the intellect in quite the way Descartes is proposing.

When Merleau-Ponty attempts to explain the inadequacies of that dualistic view he must use the language and 'hooks' for ideas laid down by the very framework he is refuting. The word he chooses for a new understanding, a new ontology, is "Flesh"<sup>14</sup>

and he explains that this should not be thought of as a coming together of substances, a way of combining body and spirit. “The flesh we are speaking of is not matter”<sup>15</sup>, on this point he is perfectly clear. To understand what it is we must see flesh as an element and to understand the idea of elements we must again step outside of Cartesian thinking. It does not bring together subject and object into a close relationship and thus aid our accurate understanding of objects. The element “flesh” is both me and the world – “a texture” - and it is our ability to both see and be seen, to touch and be touched that both gives us that direct experience of the enfolding nature of the world and presents us with an emblem of that enfolding.

The examination of interiors using the non-visual senses seemed closer to this understanding than the suggested ocularcentric manner of apprehending the world as outside and at a distance. But for Merleau-Ponty this experience is very much wrought through an examination of vision. He does not cast aside the visual in order to embrace the world in the immediacy of Being.

In the story of ocularcentrism the twentieth century is marked by the pessimistic warnings of the phenomenon itself, most starkly in Bataille and Sartre. Merleau-Ponty will not enter that same pessimistic discourse because he has a different understanding of the visual sense. It is not for him the analytic, measuring instrument that will deal in only surfaces or idealised space and this stems from his phenomenological investigations which reveal sight as experienced, outside of Cartesian configurations.

In Phenomenology of Perception he attempts to reveal sight in all its dimensions including depth and colour. This confirms the meaning gap in dealing with only the primary qualities as emphasised in the sciences. In later works he still reiterates Husserl’s (Crisis part 2) analysis of the situation. This is concisely laid out in ‘Eye and Mind’ where he says:

Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. Operating within its own realm, it makes its constructs of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. It is, and has always been, that admirably active, ingenious and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general - as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our ingenious schemes.<sup>16</sup>

His own study of perception reveals that it is not something essential to the visual that brings about the approach to the world proposed by the ocularcentric thesis, but a particular historical/cultural setting that traps the eye into emphasising a particular mode. Three aspects of our usual understanding of the visual are reconfigured by Merleau-Ponty: that we cannot perceive depth<sup>17</sup>, that colour is unimportant and that vision operates in isolation from the other senses<sup>18</sup>. These three aspects of the visual as it is experienced redeem the eyes from the claim of ocularcentrism. However, the ‘Cartesian eye’, as the examples of interiors demonstrated, does seem to draw us to the surfaces.



---

<sup>1</sup> This point is strikingly demonstrated by Martin Jay in Downcast Eyes in his opening paragraph that contains twenty one visual metaphors. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> For Plato sight is the foundation of philosophy and the sense most able to lead us to the truth. (Timaeus.) For Aristotle sight is the clearest of the senses (On the Soul). Both appear to distrust the other senses, particularly taste and touch, because of their animality.

<sup>3</sup> Classen, C. Worlds of Sense London: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Locke, J. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding London: Dent and Sons, 1990, pp. 57 -65.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, R. The Philosophical Works of Descartes vol.1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Howes, D. 'Olfaction and Transition' in Howes, d. ed. The Varieties of Sensory Experience Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Ong, W. The Presence of the Word New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, p.74.

<sup>8</sup> The problem of the given being different to that which is observed from an ocularcentric standpoint is a problem if ocularcentrism is our real standpoint and not just a cultural patina on a human experience which still 'somewhere' responds to the given.

<sup>9</sup> Howes, D. Ibid p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> Howes summarises some of the findings in this area. Ibid. p.132.

"The explanation for this always emotional, and sometimes quite mystical, experience lies in the anatomy of smell. Olfactory signals are transmitted via the tiny hair like cilia at the ends of the olfactory neurones into the limbic region of the brain, the core of emotions and memory. The limbic system, by virtue of its control over the hypothalamus, activates the endocrine (hormone) and autonomic nervous systems (Gibbons 1986: 332-7; Pelletier 1977: 40-81). As Barbara Lex (1977: 330) points out, intense stimulation of the autonomic nervous system 'retards or prohibits logical reasoning'".

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty 'Eye and Mind' in Johnson, G. ed The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993, p.124.

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. The Visible and The Invisible trans. Lingis, A. Ed. Lefort, C. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Descartes, 'Objections and Replies, First Replies' Cottingham edition of Descartes Selected Philosophical Writings Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.132.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, G. addresses the biblical genealogy of the word and the shift from "Being" to "Flesh" between 'Eye and Mind' and Visible and Invisible in 'The Colours of Fire: Depth and desire in Merleau-Ponty's "Eye and Mind"' in Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, Vol. 25, No. 1. 1994. pp. 53 - 63.

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. The Visible and The Invisible, p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. 'Eye and Mind' in Johnson, G. ed Ibid. p.121.

---

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. 'Cézanne's Doubt' in Johnson, G. ed Ibid. p.65.

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. The Visible and The Invisible p. 134.