Figurations of the Ecstatic: The Labor of Attention in Aesthetic Experience

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Descriptions of "aesthetic arrest," those ecstatic moments that lift the common sense subject-object dichotomy, abound in Merleau-Ponty's writings. These special experiences, found in both artistic and mystical accounts, arise from the daily life of ordinary perception. Such experiences enable the artist, philosopher, or mystic to overturn received categories and describe phenomena in a creative way; they become dangerous when treated as the sine qua non of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic arrest, though rare in consumer society, need not be overwhelmed by the flood of information and can still provide fresh glimpses into the world as lived.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work often draws from examples of "aesthetic arrest": those profound experiences of the world in which the self is displaced and seen as if from the outside, and the outside, in turn, pierces the subject's interiority. Merleau-Ponty writes his theory around artistic experiences and builds on them, explaining without mystification how such inversions are possible. Merleau-Ponty's accounts drip with sexual and religious imagery: he speaks of a "coition" and "communion" between body and world, in addition to imagery of "penetration." Analysis of these passages shows that ecstasy need not be considered supernatural; rather, ecstasy arises within the daily "intercourse" that people have with things. These ecstatic moments revivify and clarify descriptions of aesthetic experience and should not be shunted aside as somehow beyond the pale of normal perception. Ecstasy should be included in accounts of the aesthetic as serving an important part in the creative process; it should not, however, be treated as an end in itself. Examining Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the ecstatic shows how it overlaps with religious accounts and how it opens an aesthetic ethics for today's consumer subjectivities.

The texts that first come to mind are the musings on painting from "Cezanne's Doubt" and "Eye and Mind." In these striking passages, the artist receives the mute communications of the world through an active passivity. André Marchand wrote, in a passage quoted by Merleau-Ponty that cannot be overexamined:

> In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were

Janus Head, 12(1),

> speaking to me...I was there, listening...I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it....I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. Perhaps I paint to break out.

Such statements cannot be dismissed as merely metaphorical: Merleau-Ponty believes that perception works because the body literally does have contact with the world, and that artistic and cultural forms are extensions of the things they describe. Merleau-Ponty notices a paradox inserted within fleshly experience: passive reception of the world's meanings depends upon a highly active component of disciplined attention. A preparatory period of intense contemplative activity makes the instances of "ek-stase" (literally "out of place") described in the essays on painting as well as in the Phenomenology of Perception possible. The moment of pure passivity, the moment of suspension in which subject and object inter-penetrate one another, paradoxically requires a great deal of work, the work of attunement or attention, in which the perceiver holds everyday attitudes towards the world and propositions about the world in abeyance. Moments of aesthetic arrest enable a greater clarity, a greater communion with the things to emerge, which can then generate more fluid cultural meanings.

Paul Cézanne said, "the landscape thinks itself in me...and I am its consciousness": this artistic reversal does not happen automatically in some sort of breathless, sentimental way. Not spontaneous in the usual sense of being carefree and unconditioned, Cézanne's realization emerged from preparatory work. Paul Cézanne deliberately planned to have such an experience and expended great effort in its actualization, which Merleau-Ponty emphasizes:

> He needed one hundred working sessions for a still life, one hundred and fifty sittings for a portrait...Painting was his world and his way of life. He worked alone, without students, without admiration from his family, without encouragement from his critics. He painted on the afternoon of the day his mother died.

His landscape painting even entailed a thorough study of the geology and copious preparatory sketches, which he subsequently forgot the moment the work proper commenced. Cézanne labored to "germinate" his landscape painting by studying interpretive traditions (he did, after all, spend hours wandering the halls of the Louvre, and geology, itself, constitutes an interpretive tradition) and then abandoned or transformed these traditions in the

moment of encounter with the landscape. The preparatory studies made the attunement possible, allowed Cézanne to see the landscape in front of him. The horizons of interpretive discourse opened onto the landscape itself and this opening onto the present allowed the traditions to mean something for Cézanne in the moment of artistic insight. The preparatory phase, though less sexy, less ecstatic, than the coition itself, reveals the dynamic of aesthetic experience: the world entangles itself with knowers through perception (foreplay) and things implicate themselves with the interpretive traditions that "describe" them. The study of geology allowed Cezanne to see previously unnoticed aspects of the landscape, which were then incorporated into the visual whole encountered by Cézanne and captured on the canvas according to the gleaned insight.

The labor involved in creating the right conditions for the moment of ek-stasis need not always be as strenuous as Cézanne's artistic fulminations. Sometimes more commonplace attunement facilitates the shift toward the passive reception of new experience, as in the attention needed for enjoying a glass of wine. Wine aficionado Gary Vaynerchuk, in a radio interview, says that people often hesitate to order wine in a restaurant:

> Everyone's passing [the wine list] off because they're afraid to make the right choice. I've never seen anybody do that with a menu,' he says. 'You're not concerned what kind of cheeseburger you order. If you say extra pickles, nobody's critiquing what you did.

Vaynerchuk hopes that wine drinkers will begin to use fresh terminology drawn from their own experiences to describe the wine that they drink. He loves it when someone says about a glass of wine, "Oh this reminds me of cotton candy I had at the fair in '84. That's real," he says. "The terms they read from Robert Parker, the Wine Spectator, that they regurgitate and think they're cool mean nothing." The catch-phrases of professional sommeliers keep non-professionals from enjoying the experience, because wine drinking becomes a display of sophistication rather than a pleasurable experience in its own right. This accretion of traditional categories and the subsequent canonizing of a certain language gives the aesthetic a bad name—as the province of high brow ostentation—and creates a cleavage between subject and object, such that the unwitting enthusiast comes to love a certain vocabulary rather than wine, or, better, this particular wine being drunk on a friend's backyard deck on this particular Spring evening.

A canonical procedure attends the serious drinking of wine: knowing about the agriculture of wines, the regions and varietals, re-enacting the official process of swirling, smelling, and finally drinking, recapitulating the standard descriptions of this or that "bouquet." None of these activities necessarily impede understanding and appreciation of the wine-drinking sensorium: they may even help to disclose facets of the experience. The problem with expert knowledge only arises when it substitutes for the lived reality.

Received categories often stunt aesthetic enjoyment and constrain creative expression, one of the side effects of formal discourse. Refraining from all speech and sitting in silence may revivify experience, but such meditative practices need not be the only way in which aesthetes (and here I mean this term in a broad sense without its negative connotations) place received categories in abeyance. Postmodern philosopher Mark C. Taylor has remarked that reading and writing can function as meditative practices, that language, too, carries the basic structure of emptiness described by Buddhist philosophy. Language opens a powerful point of entry into the world, like the first thumbnail driven under the peel of an orange that helps to unravel the skin from the fruit. This need not be characterized as an imperialistic projection of meaning onto a previously meaningless world: both language and world cooperate in the gestural interplay of meaning. Viewing language as gestural avoids ossification into fixed categories and allows language to continue to serve as an appendage or extension of the world-as-lived rather than as a substitution for it.

Merleau-Ponty writes in "The Philosopher and his Shadow" that "[l]ogical objectivity derives from carnal intersubjectivity on the condition that it has been forgotten as carnal intersubjectivity, and it is carnal intersubjectivity itself which produces this forgetfulness by wending its way toward logical objectivity." Language forgets its origins and pretends to stand alone, an ineluctable enigma of words. Husserl and his heirs in phenomenology and associated disciplines allow accreted meanings to fall away, returning again to the phenomena. True, the "reduction...never ceased to be an enigmatic possibility for Husserl," but this work, this activity towards passivity, holds open the possibility for a true encounter with phenomena rather than a solipsistic "regurgitation" of the same old themes. The painter, the novelist, the religious seeker, and the philosopher can all share in a common mission: all of these personalities seek to encounter the world in a new way, to see with new eyes and hear with new ears ("Let everyone with ears to hear, listen.").

Merleau-Ponty did not use religious language in the Phenomenology of Perception in an accidental or tongue-in-cheek way; rather, Merleau-Ponty re-described the religious within the context of everyday perception. The labors of the ascetic are akin to the labors of the artist in that both seek to heighten their experience of mundane reality. Although Merleau-Ponty does not often address the religious or mystical as such, he does provocatively venture in this direction, as in this passage:

> Just as the sacrament not only symbolizes, in a sensible species, an operation of Grace, but is also the real presence of God, which it causes to occupy [la fait résider] a fragment of space and communicates to those who eat of the consecrated bread, provided that they are inwardly prepared, in the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body, provided that it is capable of doing so, so that sensation is literally a form of communion.

Perception conveys the world's intentions (or what Merleau-Ponty had earlier called "lines of force," also described as "moods" or "styles") to the bodily actor in a sacramental fashion, so that all conceptualization draws its potency from a prior dialogue or interplay between person and world. The labor of "inward prepar[ation]" opens a passage through which the setting can act on the participant, in which each subjectivity can be "penetrated by the universe." Although Merleau-Ponty did not undertake such a project, he might have described the Roman Catholic image of the Sacred Heart or the Hindu and Buddhist heart chakra in much the same way. The receptive practitioner is pierced and set ablaze by the world as the heart image opens the systolic and diastolic rhythms of interpenetration that occur in daily existence. The effulgence of the world's activity courses through the veins and orifices of every creature, a process which images of the heart center reveal. Just by virtue of being embodied or by virtue of being a thing, each person, animal, and thing participates in the mutual dance of affectivity.

Phenomenologist Glen Mazis argues for a participatory, affective ethic in his book Earthbodies: Recovering Our Planetary Senses. Mazis applies Kierkegaardian existentialism to contemporary culture, arguing that an aesthetic detachment prevents people from connecting emotionally with others and staking a claim in the world. The aesthete, in one of Kierkeg-

aard's stages, applies the "rotation method" to the various situations of life, skipping from one pleasure to the next without ever engaging in a concrete situation, without ever risking emotional attachment. Kierkegaard's aesthete cultivates shallow relationships for the purpose of what Aristotle called utility or pleasure, never wanting to become too involved with that person's problems and emotions. This shallow aesthetic obsesses with control over the situation and manipulates circumstances so that he or she always experiences only what s/he wants to experience. Kierkegaard's aesthete does not have an absolute lack of sadness or pathos or empathy; s/he just determines the precise conditions and moments in which to savor these emotions, like costly bitter spirits. The shallow aesthete collects a storehouse of melancholic, gleeful, or sensual experiences to treasure, while the engaged aesthete remains fully participatory from start to finish.

While the fully engaged person is immersed in the situation, the shallow aesthete steps back, observing her/himself in a detached fashion, as though life were a game or a movie reel. Mazis proposes a re-awakening of our "planetary senses" as an antidote to the shallow aesthetic and a return to responsibility and relationship as a better, more ethical, mode of embodiment in the world. This embedded, relational aesthete knows the world ecstatically, recognizing the "surround" as an extension of the self: I can know the world through the technologies, landscapes, dreams, and animals that share this Umwelt with me. Refusing to fly into another region of pure spirit, Platonic Being, or isolated ego intensifies a commitment to this world and deepens appreciation of its mysteries.

Here a problem presents itself with regard to the moments of "aesthetic arrest" in Merleau-Ponty's writings. Certainly no one could accuse Cézanne of practicing the "rotation method": his aesthetic appreciation of the landscape came at a cost, the cost of endless hours of work and a razor sharp focus. Cézanne also labored to overcome an imperialistic gaze, and, if we take him at his word, to allow the landscape to communicate itself on its own terms. But one cannot help but be disturbed by the details that Merleau-Ponty relates without comment: for example, that Cézanne painted on the afternoon of his mother's funeral and had strained relationships with other people. This aesthetic comes dangerously close to a Platonic flight from the world if, indeed, Cézanne short-circuited the process of grieving for his mother and maintaining normal relationships with others in order to concentrate on his obsession for painting. The "rotation method" seems preferable, in some cases, to a singular fixation on an aesthetic object. A

comparison between Cézanne and Saint Augustine on this point shows that both painter and mystic can endanger ordinary relationships through a hyper-aesthetic concentration, or by taking aesthetic arrest as a privileged category of awareness.

Saint Augustine would undoubtedly rail against the accusation that his neo-Platonic Christian mysticism can be called a specialized figuration of the aesthetic: after all, he constantly decries the senses as a source of corruption and vice and the world as a tremendous weight that keeps him from his calling. Saint Augustine could agree that the senses represent a kind of intercourse with the world, but he would find this to be a reason to flee from the senses no less than he flees from sex. Augustine laments his sexual sin with his concubine, "a Carthage girl of low social standing," who was the mother to his child, and dismisses her after 15 years in a committed relationship. Augustine describes the loss as follows: "The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn away from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage. My heart which was deeply attached was cut and wounded and left a trail of blood." Augustine detaches himself from the flow of relationship in favor of a vertical ascent, an ascent towards God and an ascent in societal stature. Contemporary audiences easily condemn Augustine for failing to resist society's conventions. He should have stayed with the woman he loved: movie plots inform us that this is the way to go about things. In his better moments, however, Augustine resembles Cezanne in that he, also, wants to expose the hidden dimensions of things. Although Augustine seeks to expose the hidden life of God in things and Cezanne the hidden life of nature, both tasks share common features and, in fact, cannot be distinguished without some priveleged point of reference.

The mystical vision that Saint Augustine describes is not far from the moments of "aesthetic arrest" in the writings of Merleau-Ponty. A prime example is Augustine's description of the vision at Ostia that he experiences along with his mother, Monica. Proceeding by means of gradual steps that resemble those described by Diotima in Plato's Symposium, the two undergo an ascent to a moment of "total concentration of the heart" in which they are in direct contact with eternal wisdom:

> Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved up beyond

> them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food.

The "flash of mental energy" described by Augustine as the origin of his encounter with Wisdom seems akin to the way in which Cézanne "caught [the landscape] alive in a net." Augustine and Monica, too, are gazing out at a landscape, from a window overlooking a garden on the river Tiber. Cézanne wishes to capture the landscape. Augustine wants to move beyond it completely, but the process works in a similar way for both people. The outlines of an artistic process emerge in both cases: an initial phase characterized by difficulty and exertion, an intellectual process or scaffolding constructed in order to attune the self to the potential experience, and a final stage in which propositional truths are cast aside in favor of a direct flash of insight. Finally, both men proceed to create accounts of the experience: Augustine in words, Cézanne in painting. Merleau-Ponty would see both painting and writing as gestural attempts to describe the world's signifying agency.

In the moment of aesthetic arrest, habits of thought instantiated by discursive traditions fall away, and the phenomena are encountered in a fresh manner, in what American philosopher Charles Peirce called "firstness." The experience of "firstness," as a contact with the world, however brief, unmediated by sedimented linguistic constructs, enables an overthrowing of old categories ("firstness" in some sense, gives birth to "secondness," the arisal of conflict and tension, and "thirdness," the domain of organized semiosis). This accounts for the originality in any truly new work of philosophy, painting, or literature: these works describe more faithfully the ways in which the phenomena appear before consciousness, or, better, the ways in which things and bodies affect one another in co-present "communion." But the above considerations raise the need for an ethics of the aesthetic. Experiences of "aesthetic arrest" overturn ossified categories and bring to new expression previously unnoticed features of the world, but, once created, the artifact, like the gollum of Jewish legend, goes on functioning without the artist who spawned it. In this sense, Cézanne does not seem much different from Saint Augustine, or for that matter, Francis Bacon, in seeking to extract from nature a hidden essence.

Bacon's writings on proto-scientific dominion, another stalking obsession with nature, employed imagery of rape and torture. Like the inquisitor, Bacon thought that a scientific investigator should "hound nature in her wanderings...entering and penetrating into these holes and corners [of

"nature's secrets"] when the inquisition of truth is his whole object." For Bacon, humankind exercises dominion over the earth through science, fulfilling the divine commandment of Genesis. The imagery of rape in Bacon's works calls into question the logic of "coition" in Merleau-Ponty's works as well. If the landscape communicates by its silence, and that silence does not even fully come to speech once words have arrived (words themselves as a kind of silence), nothing guards the world's agency from the intrusions of human investigators. Painting, literature, and philosophy become complicated attempts to despoil the world of its treasures, to transform living presence into dead artifacts which can be collected in order to increase the stature of these human agents.

Merleau-Ponty, aware of this problem, builds a critique of human gestural attempts into his discussion of art and philosophy. The museum transforms "attempts" into master works, ossifying a certain viewpoint into the accepted one, just as philosophy turns thinkers into masters of the past, makes once-living people into proper nouns. The museum kills painting in that it canonizes the attempt, stripping it of its gestural significance. The history of philosophy similarly makes the process of thinking into achievements of thought. A painting, like a work of philosophy, should be valued when it stirs something in the viewer, when it allows hidden aspect of the world's effulgence to come to light. A healthy attitude towards the aesthetic returns masterworks to the status of attempts and recognizes the gestural nature of all speech, all writing, all painting. All of these avenues of expression, stamped with their incompletion, leave discourse open to further elucidation. This incompletion, this opening to another context, makes writing and art valuable. Leaving discourse open, banishing the need for a final statement, for a full grasp of reality, for a complete and total faith, preserves the aesthetic from its imperialistic iterations.

Merleau-Ponty's problem with the Platonism of Augustine and the existentialism of Kierkegaard is not that they describe coming face to face with an absolute, but that they finally make a leap into that absolute, preferring it over all else, or "sacrificing good faith to faith." Merleau-Ponty inserts a caveat into his discussion of the similarities between Catholic faith, existential faith, and his own "perceptual faith," saying:

> [i]f commitment goes beyond reasons, it should never run contrary to reason itself. Man's value does not consist in either an explosive, maniac sincerity [complete fidelity to an overarching idea] or an

> unquestioned faith. Instead, it consists of a higher awareness which enables him to determine the moment when it is reasonable to take things on trust and the moment when questioning is in order, to combine faith and good faith within himself, and to accept his party or his group with open eyes, seeing them for what they are.

In other words, whether the faith is socialism or Catholic Christianity, a sober-headed judgment prevents that faith from going too far and preserves a check on the unlimited expansion of a single idea at the cost of all else.

Although the passage quoted above does not directly talk about the experience of "aesthetic arrest," it provides some guidance for a nascent ethics of the aesthetic. Cézanne might not have gone on a flight out of the world of sense in his search for a "motif," but clearly there was something of an "explosive, maniac sincerity" in the way that Cézanne stalked the landscape. In his fidelity to the subjects of his painting, Cézanne ran the risk of infidelity to the real people in his life. Still, no one can say whether he crossed the line from "going beyond reasons" to "going beyond reason itself" in his pursuit of painting. Likewise, no external observer can say for sure whether Saint Augustine ought to have paid more attention to the bleeding wound in his side when he dismissed his concubine. Ecstatic experiences beckoned to these "masters" of painting and spirituality, and their responses are recorded in canonical works, works which contemporary interpreters should value to the extent that they open the present to further elucidation.

This leads to another consideration about these ecstatic experiences in Merleau-Ponty's texts and other ecstatic experiences akin to them. It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty does not hold up such examples as models to be emulated: Merleau-Ponty never suggests that everyone should have a strange experience of being "seen" by trees. Rather, Merleau-Ponty holds up these extreme, poetic examples to show what happens in any and every perceptual event. Much like Merleau-Ponty explores the phenomenon of the phantom limb, the hallucinations of schizophrenics, the experiences of blind people, he also cares about artistic and poetic ways of describing the world. These liminal cases reveal that things send out their surfaces as "to-be-seen" and "to-be-felt," participating in cultural forms that attempt to describe them. Person and world cross for Merleau-Ponty, thoroughly enmeshed in one another, so that terms like "outside" and "inside," "transcendent" and "immanent," "active" and "passive" lose all finality. Such terms exist only as articulations or folds within a larger whole and cannot be conceived as

having independent existence. Each moment of aesthetic experience folds into the next, which means that all aesthetic experiences, from the most shallow to the most vaunted, lie on the same continuum.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy makes it difficult to make absolute divisions between the religious and the aesthetic or between the ecstatic and the ordinary, which should be viewed as a strength of his analysis. Merleau-Ponty did not inhabit consumerist, image-driven society to the same degree that first-world people do today, and the status of "aesthetic arrest" in this milieu is open to question. The glut of images makes it difficult for individuals to attune themselves to the environment, to attend to this particular image on this particular day. The plastic ethereality of images in mass media empties mundane reality of all wonder while sexualizing and romanticizing consumption. An aesthetic ethics of consumerist infotainment would maintain the possibility of aesthetic arrest along the lines suggested by Merleau-Ponty while not allowing corporate images to have the final say when contemplating subjectivity. A brief detour through Heidegger reveals some guidelines today's aesthetic ethics, for an ecstatic ethics that might "go beyond reasons...[but not beyond] reason itself."

Heidegger described objects as "ready-to-hand" [*Zuhandenheit*] and situated objects and relations within an umwelt, an environment or surround. Subjectivity, too, arises as part of this matrix of interrelation, and for this reason Heidegger found care to be fundamental. Since all existence happens as embodied existence, and since all embodied existence therefore takes place with others, animate and inanimate, it follows that being-there (Dasein) fundamentally entails care. However, a tension manifests itself in Heidegger's work between readiness-to-hand and care: lacking a world, culturally manufactured objects do not merit inclusion as possible objects of concern, and the fact that they exist within always-opening networks of relation does not mitigate this fact. Heidegger himself recognizes this tension between care and objects of use. The problem then becomes to find a philosophy that can bring care even to objects of use and that can make room for a full range of aesthetic experiences even in the midst of consumer societies that create a plethora of images without the attunement necessary for the ecstatic. As images become more prolific and more sophisticated, their sheer number and frenetic pace stunt attention and care, creating a situation in which individuals encounter aesthetic arrest less frequently. Surely one can inhabit a consumerist milieu ecstatically, but current modes of representation encourage a rapid processing of information rather than

an embrace of this particular present. Readiness-to-hand trumps care in this situation, and everything becomes disposable and transposable: this image matters no more than any other, and this moment replaces another without differentiation.

These others I encounter also lose uniqueness as they bury their identity in widely distributed cultural markers (the "dictatorship of the 'they' [das Man]"); however, this condition does not erase, but merely occludes uniqueness. The person who would care must then operate against the tide of disposability and move into Gabriel Marcel's sense of the term, of disponibilité, an openness or availability to human and non-human others and to a world in which I participate and do not merely observe. And yet an aesthetic ethics of the consumerist society must take the markers, the surface, the mass-produced seriously: to not take these markers as in some way constitutive of individual personality would suggest that some essence maintains itself beneath the markers. No stable place of reference exists from which to view the person without the consumerist markers: "a search for sanity outside the system is not the goal." An ethic of care for consumer society should remain open to these images, but it should not allow images to foreclose on a future which is not yet present. Images reveal but they also hide: so the burden of consumer subjectivity is the ethical labor of remaining open to further revelations of the present, to the opening of this horizon onto another, in the hopes that one will be affected, will be opened as one is open to others. "Coition" or "communion" need not be a one-sided imposition of my knowledge onto that other, nor does the consumer image necessarily colonize the subjectivity of others. The markers of identity selected by consumers mask the self, but one person seeks in vain for the 'real' self "behind" these images. The masks go all the way down, and, if a revelation occurs, it lies in the fact that the process of unveiling never ends, in a realization that each mask also faces, but not in a final way. Like Hegel's bacchanalian whorl, a pattern emerges from the maelstrom of referents that each individual chooses to put forward as representations of the self or in place of the self.

Consumer images bundle other cultural referents into a logo/s and identify ideal content with a product, but these images remain in suspension inasmuch as they do not exhaustively conquer the personhood of the one selecting the image. A reserve or gap opens in the slippage between the mediated self and the self as known otherwise (i.e. through interests, relationships, etc.). The image, inasmuch as someone selects or authors it,

must extend from some choice, and as a choice, the image never loses its contingency: the image cannot completely be attached either to a stable self or to an outside entity which it "depicts." An opposite mistake would be to suppose that the image has nothing to do with the person selecting it, that consumer images are completely free-floating. The histories of individuals, their temporal "thickness," play a large role in their performance of self and one person encounters another person even in the midst of mediation. The subject writes him/herself through the selection of images, "complies" with these images, and yet also compiles them in a creative way. Both compliance and compilation, which cannot be separated, occur even while conforming to the discursive logic of the display (i.e. the T-shirt, the home page, the sticker or button, etc).

The ecstatic moment peels away the accretions of prior knowledge about someone or something and enables a fresh encounter with the world; without ec-stasis, knowledge would shield the knower from actual encounters, would remain solipsistic. In the moment of ec-stasis, the knower is actually opened to a new experience. Contemporary society must maintain the possibility of the ecstatic in order to preserve the uniqueness of others and the concomitant ethical burden. Categories of thought alone do not safeguard the uniqueness of the people, animals, and things that we encounter. Those who would care must also make a movement in the opposite, more intuitive direction in the willingness to be affected, to put oneself at the disposal of another. This age of consumerism militates against such action, which means that those who would care must actively choose to be passive, must cooperate in the process of listening when it is much more expedient to do otherwise.

Thinking of aesthetics and subjectivity in the twenty-first century begins with a new kind of epoché or reduction. Each unfolding moment offers new openings to understanding, and hence, new openings to misunderstanding. At the same time, each unfolding horizon also opens the possibility for the ecstatic, for the experience of "aesthetic arrest." Given the glut of media-driven images in the first world and the multitude of moments that constitute daily life, no one can hold all of the possibilities open at every moment. The face of reality simply offers too many vectors for exploration to remain open to them all. Contemporary consumer-citizens must select among the possible vectors or motifs for aesthetic experience, must learn to choose moments of undivided attention and cling to them despite the tide of contrary forces. The epoché in this situation brackets pre-conceptions in the Husserlian sense, but without the emphasis on phenomenology as a

pure, transcendental science: this new epoché brackets the corporate "They" suggestions for how I should live and understand my body and the bodies of others. In an image-driven society, no one can choose whether or not to be subjected to this or that corporate logo or this or that disciplined space (think of the strictures the shopping mall, the roadway places on bodies); freedom within these mediated spaces means holding images and prevailing vectors in abeyance, bracketing them, and continuing with aesthetic projects that may run against the grain suggested by these spaces and images. This bracketing does not simply pretend that these images and vectors do not exist; rather, phenomenological bracketing allows these images and vectors as possibilities without allowing them to gain unconscious purchase. An odd kind of passivity emerges, an active choice to refrain from categorizing the present with received labels. This active passivity allows for the reception of real uniqueness, of moments not reducible to this or that descriptor.

Notes

1. Nicholsen, Sierry Weber. T*he Love of Nature and the End of the World: The Unspoken Dimensions of Environmental Concern* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) 16, 96. Nicholsen takes the term from Joseph Campbell.
2. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). Trans. Colin Smith as Phenomenology of Perception (London: Routledge, 2004). PP 373 / PP-F 370.
3. "Ecstasy" literally means "out of place" and, in mystical experience, refers to the sense of encountering a profound mystery that overruns or cancels the ordinary boundaries of the subject. The mystic feels overcome or engulfed by the dark luminosity of the divine. In the phenomenological tradition since Heidegger, ecstasy refers to unity of the three "times" of past, present, and future, which need not be intellectually re-assembled by the experiencer, since they coalesce in Dasein (being there). Ecstasy is a "letting-oneself-be-encountered-by [*Begegnenlassens von*]" the present in the onrush of the future and the traces of the past (Being and Time H. 329). Merleau-Ponty correlates time with spatial horizons experienced by the lived body. Although we may be said abstractly (for Merleau-Ponty, erroneously) to live on the razor's edge between past and future, we ordinarily do not experience temporality in that manner. Time's thickness, the temporal horizons of experience, are experienced as a result of topological or spatial horizons. Time is not a series of "nows" but the possibilities and continuities active in

the present (PP 477-479). When I refer to "ecstasy" in this essay, I refer to an intensely focused experience in which an object is seen, heard, or felt (or tasted or touched) "as if for the first time" as a result of the labor of attunement which then ruptures into an openness to the object. The preparatory exercise of attunement makes possible the moment of "aesthetic arrest" in which the object eclipses subjectivity and becomes everything. This sense of the ecstatic has significant commonalities with mysticism but does not imply a flight into a supernatural realm .

4. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, *The Primacy of Perception,* ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 167.

5. Luca Vanzago. "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Metaphor in Merleau-Ponty's Last Writings." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43, no. 3 (2005): 465-466. Traditional accounts of metaphoricity assume a "one to one relationship of coincidence" between the terms of the metaphor and the terms described; Merleau-Ponty's model is a different one, in which "language is not simply an exercise in naming things that pre-exist this exercise, but is a way to let the things be." See also Alphonso Lingis, "Being in the Interrogative Mood," *The Horizons of the Flesh: Critical Perspectives on the Thought of Merleau-Ponty.* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973) 78-91. Merleau-Ponty preserves ambiguity or indeterminacy at every stage of the journey from thing to concept.

6. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 81and translator's note.

7. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Le Doute de Cézanne," *Sens et Non-Sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948) 15-49. Trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus as "Cézanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 9-25. I will give the English page numbers followed by the page numbers in the original French when I have consulted both editions. SNS 17 / SNS-F 32.

8. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* 9.

9. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* 17 / 32.

10. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* 17 / 32.

11. I am thinking here of the memorable passage in Martin Buber's I and Thou that begins, "I contemplate a tree." (57ff). The encounter or "relation" with the tree (what I would here call a moment of "aesthetic arrest") includes its genus and species, its "kind and condition," its unseen sucking of water, etc., but the moment of ecstasy cannot be limited to any one of these factors. So these thoughts about the tree prepare the way for

the encounter, but the moment itself arises spontaneously and cannot be controlled or induced. Indeed, the desire for the experience must itself be transcended, which is why Buber critiques the word "experience." "Those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is "in them" and not between them and the world." (56).

12. "Wine Blogger Makes Choosing a Bottle Palatable." *NPR Weekend Edition,* April 28, 2007. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9839977

13. "Wine Blogger" *NPR Weekend Edition*, April 28, 2007.

14. Taylor, Mark C. "Masking: Domino Effect." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53.3 (1986): 547-557.

15. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Signs, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 173.

16. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* 161.

17. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 246 / 245-246.

18. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior,* trans. Alden Fisher (Boston: Beacon, 1963). 168-169. The discussion of "lines of force" in the Structure of Behavior is an important precursor to the formulation of the "chiasm" in The Visible and the Invisible.

19. Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception* 167

20. Mazis, Glen A, *Earthbodies: Rediscovering Our Planetary Senses* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2002) 97-98.

21. Mazis, *Earthbodies* 96-111.

22. Mazis, *Earthbodies* 179-196.

23. Mazis, Glen, "Ecospirituality and the Blurred Boundaries of Humans, Animals, and Machines," In Ecospirit: Religion, Philosophy, and the Earth, edited by Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007): 125-155, 564-566. Mazis, Earthbodies 186.

24. Mazis, *Earthbodies* 179.

25. Chadwick, Henry, "Introduction," in Augustine, *Confessions,* trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Pres, 1991) xiii.

26. Augustine, *Confessions* 109 [VI.xv (25)] Numbers in brackets indicate marginal notation.

27. Augustine, *Confessions* 171 [IX.x (24)].

28. Augustine, *Confessions* 172 [IX.x (25)].

29. Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" in Signs (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 39-83.

30. First, Second, and Third appear as metaphysical categories through-

out much of Peirce's writing, but a very clear exposition can be found in "Letter to Lady Welby, October 12, 1904" *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings* (Values in a Universe of Chance), ed. Philip Weiner (New York: Dover, 1966) 381—393.

31. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* 168; Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception 246 / 245-246.

32. Merchant, Carolyn, "Dominion Over Nature," in *The Gender and Science Reader*, ed. Muriel Lederman and Ingrid Bartsch (London: Routledge, 2001): 68-81.

33. Francis Bacon, qtd. in Merchant, "Dominion," 69

34. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* 19.

35. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* 179. emphasis in original.

36. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* 179-180.

37. Dillon, Martin C., *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

38. Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962) 98, 103 [69, 73]. Numbers in brackets refer to German editions.

39. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* cf. 58, 65, 83-84. [34, 41, 57].

40. Levinas, Emmanuel. "Uniqueness." In *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other* trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. (New York: Columbia University Press): 189-196. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 164.

41. Marcel, Gabriel. "Belonging and Disposability." In *Creative Fidelity,* trans. Robert Rosthal. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 38-57. See also Translator's note 1.

42. Barnhill, David. "Good Work: An Engaged Buddhist Response to the Dilemmas of Consumerism." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24 (2004) 55-63. 59.

43. Levinas, Emmanuel. "The Other, Utopia, and Justice." In *Creative Fidelity,* trans. Robert Rosthal. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 223-233. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 52 [29].

44. Taylor, "Masking" 548-549. Susan Alexander's otherwise excellent sociological description of the marketing of masculinity stumbles in suggesting that "branded masculinities purposely constructed by multinational corporations" can be contrasted with "what masculinity really means today." See "Stylish Hard Bodies: Branded Masculinity in 'Men's Health' Magazine." *Sociological Perspectives* 46.4 (2003): 535-554. 552.

45. MacKendrick, Karmen. "Eternal Flesh: The Resurrection of the

Body." Discourse 27.1 (2005): 67-83. This article argues that while no stable self can be located 'beneath' the appearances, perhaps the play of images itself represents a kind of stability, i.e. in the fact that another mediated self always emerges. This is similar to MacKendrick's treatment of time and eternity.

46. Vasterling, Veronica, "Body and Language: Butler, Merleau-Ponty, and Lyotard on the Speaking Embodied Subject," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 11.2 (2003) 205-223. 208.

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