

# Touch, Flesh, and Vision

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Hand touching hand, really finger touching finger, extended to the good old handshake, all male in a curious sort of way. Lip touching lip, or lips touching lips, to include all possible lips, extended to hand holding palm to palm, decidedly female. Flesh or mucous, vision or touch, these are our choices. All are, of course, images, metaphors, by which we might glimpse something that has no materiality whatsoever, no names, and, most of the time, feels to us frankly ungraspable. They are levers to hoist us or lower us into ourselves; pry bars to wedge what is seemingly “of our nature” into our self-understanding. Yet, we all know what have the greatest power over us. It is that which we can only feel, and feel in that intimation sort of way, by some magic done on us by words like “flesh” and “mucous.”

So what are we trying to understand, grasp, feel? In banal terms simply human perception. In the classic view, this was, as we look back, rather simple. The sense organs serve us as receptors to record what is out there, as instruments seemingly do. The result is a record inside us that closely matches what is outside of us. The model for this understanding is vision and the camera obscura, which means darkened chamber. Our insides are dark chambers and our sense organs are pin holes. Information from the external world enters the dark chamber through the pinhole sense organs and casts a likeness on a recording surface, presumably our brains, inside the dark chamber. Notably this model resembles rather well our naïve experience of our own perceptual processes. We open our eye to allow the world to enter and we feel that we have in our brains an objective unadulterated picture of what is outside us.

In the last half of the twentieth century a shift has taken place in the way we understand perception. “Shift” is not a strong enough word really, because it would imply an adjustment, a modification, a focusing. What occurred was something much greater, a jolt. Studies of perception encompass a broad range of perspectives and methods. Certainly there is scientific medically based research associated with every one of the sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, skin, tongue. There is psychological research focused on each of the senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting. There are neuroscientific studies that are concerned with the brain and the greater nervous system related to perception. Philosophers, particularly phenomenologists, are interested in perception. More recently cognitive science has entered the area. So also has critical theory, that weirdly postmodern philosophical multi-disciplinary discourse. Why so much attention? Once the camera obscura model of perception is surpassed, we are quickly driven to struggle with the deepest, most complex, most profound, most elusive, most fascinating questions and ideas related to what it means to be human. The visible and the invisible, mind and body, self and other, nature and nurture, masculine and feminine, production and seduction, agency and free will, movement and cognition, consciousness and self, affect and effect, and just about every dual choice we can imagine are now brought into new discourse. No longer are we struggling to settle the score and announce the final results, the side of the duality that wins. We are now projected into complicated dynamic systems, structuralities, play, “body without organs,” “body without images,” flesh and mucous, chiasm—images that project us beyond the simple

substances and patterns into a contemplation of dimensions that transcend the easily graspable yet fuel and motor the concretions of our existence. Every scientific advance has philosophical implications. Every philosophical idea suggests a new scientific inquiry. We must look anew at the complex interactivity of sense organs and brain processing. Synesthesia, the intertwining of the senses, is now more important and interesting than is the study of senses isolated from one another. And forgotten or overlooked or unknown senses such as proprioceptors and visceral perception are suddenly playing central roles.

Movement, once identified by Aristotle as inseparable with life itself yet playing no part at all in the camera obscura approach to the senses, has returned as central to every arena. Movement is synonymous with the dynamic character of the present interests. While these various perspectives, various research approaches, remain separable, containable, they overlap profoundly. Here too we experience a jolt. No longer is it responsible to maintain isolation in the pursuit of one's interests; it is incumbent on us all to benefit from the overlap. Philosophers must understand neuroscience; humanists must appreciate cognitive science; psychologists must know physiology; students of religion and culture should be familiar with them all. Indeed, it seems to me that it is precisely here that we, especially our younger colleagues, will find our own creative future.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was among the first to shift radically, although it is certainly clear he had many forerunners. As a lifelong student of perception, late in his life Merleau-Ponty came to a new stage in his understanding. I really love a passage in his writing that is near the beginning of his acclaimed essay "The Intertwining—the Chiasm."

The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible. What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them—but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing “all naked” because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh. Whence does it happen that in so doing it leaves them in their place, that the vision we acquire of them seems to us to come from them, and that to be seen is for them but a degradation of their eminent being? What is this talisman of color, this singular virtue of the visible that makes it, held at the end of the gaze, nonetheless much more than a correlative of my vision, such that it imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence? How does it happen that my look, enveloping them, does not hide them, and, finally, that, veiling them, it unveils them?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 131.

I regret, among many things, that we don't have time to settle in for a long leisurely discussion of such passages. Seems we must rush along; our responsibility is our irresponsibility; our efficiency is our inefficiency; our breadth our shallowness. Enantiodromia.

Still, let me tarry a bit. Merleau-Ponty feels that our vision is formed in the heart of the visible. The visible is that which is subject to being seen. In the heart of that world is vision formed and certainly necessary to it. Now Merleau-Ponty seems to identify "us," that is human beings, with our vision when he writes that there is "an intimacy between it [that is visibility] and us as close as between the sea and the strand." Strand is that strip of land along the edge of the sea and we understand how intimate this relationship is. Using the word "strand" which can also mean "to leave someone in a difficult or helpless position," Merleau-Ponty anticipates his discussion of chiasm, folding one meaning of the word onto another, of almost opposing value, as he continues by saying that it is not possible that vision, i.e., humans, blend into visibility or visibility into vision, being human. We must remain stranded, estranged, otherwise, as he writes "vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible." Vision and visibility, our senses, our being human, and our environment, are born of one another, enjoy an intimacy, are interdependent, yet are separate, cannot be blended.<sup>2</sup>

Merleau-Ponty goes on to tell us about vision/perception/humanity, as he understands it. There are not things in our environment all separate and identical in themselves, that is, having an identity and a being in isolation from being seen. Nor are we seers at first empty opening to these externals. What there is is something, as Merleau-Ponty says, "to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look." Here he conjoins touch with vision in this wonderful phrase "touching it with our look." That is, we are connected with our world as by touching it. And in touching it, as Merleau-Ponty shows, we do not see it, we do not dream of seeing it, "all naked." Rather our touching look "envelops ... clothes [the things of the world] with its own flesh." Our gaze, as Merleau-Ponty imagines it, has "its own flesh." To see something is to touch it in such a way as to make it our own, make it of our own flesh. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty reveals in a series of questions, both actual and rhetorical, such a touching gaze does not hide the things in the world, does not destroy their own sovereign existence, but rather, in veiling them, clothing them, actually unveils, reveals them.

We could read the entire article this closely and benefit more than we might imagine from doing so. This passage presages much of what Merleau-Ponty says in this essay. Let me quote a couple more passages to open further his views. The first:

Between the alleged colors and visible, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh of things*.<sup>3</sup>

Notable is Merleau-Ponty's use of the words "tissue" and "flesh." Flesh refers literally to the soft tissue, that is muscle and fat that cover the bones; that flesh is subcutaneous. However, the word also means the outer surface of the human body. Thus flesh refers to the outside of the body, the skin surface. We

<sup>2</sup> Or, in terms that will be developed later, they are incomplete reversibilities.

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, pp. 132-33.

have in flesh then the same intimacy as between sea and strand, yet embraced in a single term. Merleau-Ponty jolts us by insisting that this nourishing sustaining tissue is not a thing at all, but a possibility and a latency, which he then terms *flesh*. But now the chiasmic flesh is understood as a possibility, a latency. That most meaty sweaty bloody term refers to nothing at all, but rather a condition.

And another passage:

We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only "shadows stuffed with organs," that is, more of the visible? The world seen is not "in" my body, and my body is not "in" the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it. ... there is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.<sup>4</sup>

As flesh literally indicates the interdependence and intimacy of inside and outside—in former discussions, between exteroceptors and interoceptors; subjectivity and objectivity; touch and feeling or emotion; and so on—Merleau-Ponty projects, by analogy, the same relationship between the body and the world is one of flesh and thus there must be "the flesh of the world." Flesh is then, as Merleau-Ponty goes on to say, "an 'element' of Being,"<sup>5</sup> "an ultimate notion,"<sup>6</sup> "the ultimate truth."<sup>7</sup>

Flesh is further fleshed out by Merleau-Ponty in terms of "hinge," "fold," "reversibility," "turned inside out," as well as "dehiscence," "intertwining," and "chiasm." While vision dominates as the exemplar, touch actually underlies all vision examples. One would think that touch insinuates itself more and more as Merleau-Ponty moves progressively from the camera obscura model of the senses while exploring of the idea of flesh. Touch progressively replaces vision as exemplary.

I am intrigued by Luce Irigaray's discussion and extension of Merleau-Ponty.<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty spent a great deal of time meditating and ruminating on one hand touching the other ... and, as I picture it, the hand is too meaty, too fleshy. I think Merleau-Ponty has in mind something more like the fingers, the penetrating fingers. Irigaray offers another analogy:

The hands joined, palms together, fingers outstretched, constitute a very particular touching. A gesture often reserved for women (at least in the West) and which evokes, doubles, the touching of the lips silently applied upon one another. A touching more intimate than that of one hand taking hold of another. A phenomenology of the passage between interior and exterior. A phenomenon that remains in the interior, does not appear in the light of day, speaks

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> See Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

of itself only in gestures, remains always on the edge of speech, gathering the edges without sealing them.<sup>9</sup>

Irigaray's alternative imagery helps us see how male-object-production oriented is Merleau-Ponty's crown example, although I don't understand why she didn't depict the fingers of her example as intertwining, interdigitating, rather than outstretched. As Cathryn Vasseleu writes in *Textures of Light*, Merleau-Ponty is shown by Irigaray to have had a "preoccupation with an agent for whom perception is a holding on to things as objectives and thus a means of maintaining oneself in the world."<sup>10</sup> Irigaray's "contiguous touching refers to a mode of sensibility which, in maintaining itself as sensible, parts company with things."<sup>11</sup> This shift is referred to by Vasseleu as a "tangible invisible" which she describes as "the body as a positive reserve, a vitally constituted dimension, an adherence to indetermination rather than the surfacing of an unrepresentable interior."<sup>12</sup> Tactility then is the primordial sense in which the body's interiority is constituted. Recalling Brian Massumi, I think that the proprioceptive dimension of tactility would be yet a more accurate reference. Irigaray's lips present an alternative, a predecessor actually, to Merleau-Ponty's hands. Vasseleu puts it this way:

Before the intentionality of the "double touch" (which divides touch between sentient being and the touched object), the indeterminacy of the 'hands that touch without taking hold—like the lips' (Irigaray, 1993a: 170) constitutes the body as threshold or passage, neither an interior nor an exterior world.<sup>13</sup>

And, fittingly, Irigaray calls this intimate and impreceivable join of flesh, *mucous*, or as she puts it "that most intimate interior of my flesh, neither the touch of the outside of the skin on my fingers nor the perception of the inside of these same fingers, but another threshold of the passage . . . between."<sup>14</sup> Mucous is a touching without seeing, a tangible invisible. Irigaray's tangible invisible is a non-reflexive indetermination of flesh in/between flesh, a body reserve which is not subject or object and not active or passive. Vasseleu says, it "is an attentiveness devoid of anticipation or resistance."<sup>15</sup>

Proprioception is the body knowing itself in space and movement and I believe that, for me, it serves better the idea of tangible invisible than does mucous. After all, the most basic quality of mucous is lubrication invoking the anticipation or presence of movement, passage, penetration. Lips, mucous, inevitably anticipate an opening, an entering, a merging, a frictional relationship, a tight squeeze, a susceptibility to deterioration due to exposure, an otherness, a joining. Mucous occurs at body openings suggesting a relationship with objects that is not as distinct as sea and strand, that does blend the object and subject. As one hand touching is extended into the world by Merleau-Ponty with the example of the handshake, touching lips might well be extended into the world, for example with the

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Vasseleu, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

kiss, the deep kiss, and sexual intercourse, to suggest the extension for Irigaray. These too are invisible tangibles, but involving our internal invisible tangibles with those created and enacted through certain intimate relationships with the world. While Irigaray attempts to reverse Merleau-Ponty's reversibilities, there remains something of this structurality when extending Irigaray's example beyond the body into the world, an extension that seems inevitable. Still, there are important differences. It seems that Irigaray's lips example bears a distinctly feminine relational character as opposed to Merleau-Ponty's object based example that is decidedly masculine. It would be worth our effort to pursue the differences in much greater detail.

In either case we must still ask what difference does any of this make to the study of religion and culture, to the quality of our own lives. But first, a few comments on Raymond Gibbs's discussion of the insights of cognitive science on our understanding of perception. After Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray and even Vasseleu, Gibbs seems prosaic, far too clear. Still, the work is important even in the outline of the findings. Perception involves the entire body. Perception is what we do. Perception is inseparable from action. Perception-action involves interactions of brain, body, and environment. Movement is essential to perception. Okay, got it Ray, thank you very much.

For the moment, let me pretend that I am you all, that is, young students of religion and culture, eager to accept the challenge and recreate re-imagine these studies for the nascent generation, for the post-globally-warmed world. Can I pull this off, even to catch a glimpse, opps, rather "cop a feel," of the direction we (you) might take ourselves? Certainly, the first thing would be to recognize that the current approach to the study of religion remains bound to the perceptual model based on camera obscura, on vision, to the almost complete exclusion of touch, either of the hands, the lips, or the interoceptors. We continue to frame our studies in terms of our attention outwardly directed to objects that, through acts of vision, we bring to focus on our internal screen so that, held there, we might pass them through various filtering devices to offer what we understand to be insights, the word means to "see clearly." To study others is, in our present *modus operandi*, to see them clearly. Our most persistent goal is to interpret, that is to explain in terms of meaning and significance. That is what I am doing at the moment. The assumption is that the interest we have in things is satisfied only by seeing the thing as not sufficient in the terms in which it appears. Our subjects are valuable only to the degree that we may render them in terms they would not recognize. We usually do not think that perception is even a factor in what we do; yet, perhaps we should. How we, as humans, perceive is fundamental to how we perceive our subjects. How we perceive is fundamental to the inner-dynamics of our subjects, that is, how they perceive and act in the world.

What changes might occur were we to rethink what we do in terms of an understanding of perception based on touch, on lips, on proprioception? Minimally, we will need to reinvent ourselves, rather our image of ourselves, to include body, movement, interaction. We will have to acknowledge that there is no objective other, perhaps not even an object of our study at all distinguishable from ourselves, our acts of perception. We will need to *look* at our every *insight* to *revision* ourselves without relying on vision as the principal exemplar of perception and relationship. We will need to come to a totally different understanding of ourselves as human beings and as scholars. As color is a persistent exemplar

for so many studies—engaged frequently by Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray, and Gibbs—perhaps color should be the model for our reinvention of ourselves. Religion might compare quite effectively with color, since religion doesn't exist in itself any more than does color. Religion, culture for that matter, exists only in our perception of it and our perception is interestingly based on interactive processes of body—gesture—movement, and environment. It is shaped in terms of our image schemas and our basic level categories. Religion then is based, on the one hand (perhaps I should say “lip”), on our neurophysiology and on our psychology and on our history and on our experience and on our sensorimotor patterning and body images and experiences and the very structure and character of our bodies. It exists, on the other hand, because it is an invented mode through which we interact, perceive, and encounter others and ourselves. Religion then must be reshaped by applying the exemplars of touching hands or slippery lips.