

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF CRITICAL-ETHICAL VISION: MERLEAU-PONTY, BERGSON, AND THE QUESTION OF SEEING DIFFERENTLY

What resources does vision—that concrete seeing that belongs to our bodies and our eyes—have to offer a critical ethics? This is the question that I seek to answer by appealing to the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Is vision merely a matter of re-cognition, the objectivation and categorization of the visible into clear-cut solids, into objects with definite contours and uses? Such a vision would elide the heterogeneity of what is seen, as well as its otherness. This would restrict vision to the reproduction of *clichés* (in the sense of both stereotypes and static photographs), to an instantaneous and selective framing of the present. If this were the only avenue open to vision, then our visual contact with the world and with others would be only an impoverished representation. But *can vision see differently?* That is, can vision accommodate a critical reflection of its own conditions and an ethical attitude to the otherness of what it sees? Or does ethics and philosophical critique imply going beyond the capacities of vision? This would mean giving up on vision as essentially objectifying and turning, instead, to an incorporeal and immaterial vision—to an “eye of the mind” that philosophy has often posited as a corrective to, and substitute for, body-bound (and error-ridden) vision.¹

The question of seeing differently echoes concerns raised by feminist philosophers, Linda Martín Alcoff and Kelly Oliver, in the contexts of racializing and sexist perception. If vision is structurally and inherently objectifying and categorizing, then there can be no opening onto otherness within the visual realm. This not only condemns all vision equally (from the everyday apprehension of utilizable objects to the alienating objectification of others in racist and sexist perception); it also has the effect, as Alcoff points out, of naturalizing racist and sexist vision.² Racist and sexist ways of seeing are understood, on this account, to instantiate different degrees or types of objectification that follow from the “normal” function of vision. In contrast, a phenomenology of vision drawn from Merleau-Ponty recognizes that vision may in many contexts involve objectification—may even “normally” do so in our modern scientific culture³—but traces this normalization of vision to habitual and socially sedimented ways of seeing. Not all habits make the world into objects, nor is all vision objectifying for Merleau-Ponty. I want to argue for the possibility of a critical vision that could discern habits of objectified seeing and the social structures that contextualize and motivate their formation—what Gail Weiss has called

their “social reference.”⁴ An anti-racist vision can learn to see the conditions, material, historical, social and discursive, of racializing perception.⁵ A feminist vision can see the ways in which bodies have been gendered and the exclusions and occlusions of complex difference that this has entailed. Thus I want to claim, with Alcoff, that we can “learn to see better”⁶ and, with Oliver, that an ethical, “loving vision” is possible, even necessary, for subjectivity and for seeing others.⁷

My contention in this paper is that, though vision can take the reductive and static form of objectification, another kind of vision is possible. This alternative seeing is, I argue, a critical and ethical vision that is attuned to the affective dimensions generative of visibility and not merely focused on its objectivated forms.⁸ Rather than appearing as an instantaneous and naturalized perception, this vision inscribes the thickness of the instituted past, the materiality of life and the complex dimensionality of the social. This would be a vision that overcomes its self-forgetfulness (an *anamnesis* in David Levin’s words).⁹ As such it remembers its debt to invisibility, to historicity, sociality, and otherness. It is this concrete, dynamic and affective seeing that, I believe, is forgotten when vision falls into habits of objectification. And it is this seeing that must be learned or recuperated for vision to become an opening to otherness.

More precisely, I discern within the project of seeing differently two sides that must be held together and which are, to use Merleau-Ponty’s expression, the obverse and reverse of one another (VI 138/182): the critical and the ethical. Both aspects of vision can be found in the texts of Alcoff and Oliver¹⁰—though the terms “critical” and “ethical,” and any problems ensuing from this distinction, are mine. These terms do not designate two discrete experiential moments; rather, they are meant to make visible the integral dimensions of one phenomenologically transformative experience that could be called *critical-ethical vision*. My argument in this essay exposes how any separation of critique and ethics is an abstraction that reinstalls the forgetfulness of objectifying vision.¹¹ The critical without the ethical remains detached from lived experience and risks falling back into the trap of totalizing vision—the desire to make all that is unseen visible in order to know and possess it. This is the equivalent of making visible the socially constituted subject-positions in which we find ourselves, but forgetting the diversity of subjectivities acting, responding and resisting therein (thus reducing the thickness of those subjectivities to their subject-positions).¹² But the ethical without the critical is also problematic, for it nurtures the dream of rejoining the other in his/her lived experience, concrete joys and sufferings, without seeing the differential power structures and historicities, the ways in which I and other are positioned so as to prevent any undistorted coincidence between us. This is the equivalent of seeing others as singular individuals and attempting to describe their lived experiences in an immediacy that forgets to situate the seer within the field of vision described.

My aim in this essay will be to explore the possibility of critical-ethical vision through Merleau-Ponty’s later works, in particular “Eye and Mind,”¹³

while drawing on Bergson's *Matière et mémoire* and his 1911 essay "La perception du changement" (*La pensée et le mouvant*).¹⁴ Both Merleau-Ponty and Bergson formulate critiques of what could be called habitual or "empirical" vision, a term which is Merleau-Ponty's (EM 181/68); and both locate an alternative kind of vision in the work of the artist, and in particular the painter.¹⁵ Vision, in my reading of these texts, finds different directions and dilated senses, breaking with its objectifying habits. Critically, it sees the conditions that make visibility and objectification possible—conditions which are diacritical, social, historical and material. Ethically, it changes its habits of seeing—not in order to see through the other's eyes, nor to simply see the other—but, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, in order *to see according to, or with, the other*. (EM 164/23)¹⁶

I. *The Blinders of Objectifying Vision*

In "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between a "profane," objectifying vision and the painter's vision. Objectifying vision he identifies with operationalism—for which what is is only what can be observed and measured, what can come to count as an object. (EM 160/11) *Phenomenology of Perception* had already taught us that we learn to perceive. It is through the acquisition of motor and perceptual habits that the body schema develops and that the world comes to be seen under the different aspects and with the particular differentiations that it appears to have. The perceived world mirrors the practical possibilities (the "I can," and I would add the "I cannot") of my body and changes in conjunction with my changing habits. Seeing is therefore not an indifferent and neutral recording of the visible. Seeing configures the visible according to the ways my eyes have of wandering in it, according not only to my habitual eye movements but the habitual and nascent motor anticipations of my body. Merleau-Ponty notes that "[t]he gaze gets more or less from things according to the way in which it questions them, ranges over or dwells on them. To learn to see colors is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one's own body: it is to enrich and recast the body image." (PhP 153/179) But it is not only the body that is recast by habit, the perceived world is differentiated and configured in new ways; it appears differently. Indeed, visibility takes on a particular organization that corresponds to our habits of seeing; certain differences, and hence meanings, become salient while other dimensions of difference are invisible.

In this vein, a re-reading of "Eye and Mind" becomes possible; for the "inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees" carries another sense. (EM 163/19) Vision, we could say, makes visible; it makes something visible. But objectifying vision makes the world visible as objects. It crystallizes the world into independent and self-enclosed solids, "as though [they] meant nothing to us and yet [were] predestined for our own use." (EM 159/9) This vision aims at objects and loses itself in them; since objects are posited as in-

themselves, their relation to an embodied seer is severed. The work of vision remains invisible, hidden from the regard of vision itself. Objectifying vision hence takes itself to be a “soaring-over [*survol*]” and assumes the distance between seer and seen to be absolute. But habit also contributes to this invisibility, as Alcoff shows in her reading of Merleau-Ponty.¹⁷ We see *through* our habits, through our eye movements and bodily kinaesthesia; we do not see them. This self-erasure is what allows habits, once acquired, to appear effortless and “natural.” It means that a particular visible physiognomy of the world appears as a given of that world and objecthood a “natural” property of the visible.¹⁸ In this way, objectifying habits of vision are “naturalized” and habitual configurations or structures of visibility are inscribed as in-themselves features of the world—both of bodies and things.¹⁹ This naturalized vision does not question the objectivity of the differentiations it makes in the world, nor the “natural” kinds it sees there.

But it is not only the inherence of vision in the spectacle—its historical trace, past of habit, and generative power—that are forgotten by objectifying vision. This vision also overlooks the dimensions of visibility that allow objects to come into focus, even while making use of these very dimensions to differentiate and define objects. To take the world as merely a collection of objects, vision must actively forget the diacritical systems of meaning that are at play in object-formation. To take others, or certain racialized and gendered others, to be “kinds” of bodies is to forget the ways in which these bodies are made visible in being positioned within a differential social dimension that itself remains invisible. These dimensions—whether color in Merleau-Ponty’s account or social positionality and systems of oppression in mine—are only acknowledged by objectifying vision insofar as they are made into objects or properties of objects. Thus social positionality is taken to be immanent to, and the responsibility of, certain bodies that misbehave or are oppressed by their “nature.” As the formative conditions by which objects and “others” are differentiated and discerned, these dimensions cannot be seen for themselves. Habits of objectification hence imply an “I cannot” that is the other side of their ability to see objects; objectifying vision wears blinders, “*des œillères*,” to use Bergson’s expression.²⁰

It is important to dwell on the “I cannot” of objectifying vision, for it is in this “I cannot” that the knot of objectification is tied. Rather than taking it to be inherent to all vision, this “I cannot” can be understood to belong to social, historical and cultural horizons, historically tied to modernity in the West and motivated by imaginary and epistemic investments in representation and the metaphysics of subject-object. Objectification has its horizontality,²¹ a “social reference” that Merleau-Ponty recognizes in certain places in his work—in his description of the natural scientific attitude as one through which we unlearn synaesthetic perception in the *Phenomenology* (229/265) and in his critique of operationalism in “Eye and Mind” (159-160/9-12).²²

But this social-historical horizon, which frames and motivates how we see, is itself forgotten through the logic of objectification.²³ As Merleau-Ponty

describes objectifying vision: “it works in us without us; it hides itself in making the object visible. To see the object, it is necessary *not* to see the play of shadows and light around it. The visible in the profane sense forgets its premises.” (EM 167/29-30) To look at an object is to overlook the dimensions that are generative of its visibility. Here, the “I cannot” is not in contradiction with the “I can”,²⁴ but institutes, circumscribes, and indeed makes possible the objectifying teleology of the “I can”: I can see objects only because I cannot see *otherwise* than objects. Had it been possible to see *more* than objects (the habituality, horizontality and historicity that institute vision) or *less* than objects (the diacritical differences that make meaning), then it is not “objects” as such that we would see. That is, we would not be able to see an entity that was determinate and measurable, defined in-itself and separable from other objects. Such an inert and self-same being, subject neither to contextual variation, nor to dependency, becomes visible through the operation of certain exclusions.²⁵ In seeing lived bodies, what are excluded are the temporality of their habits, their dependency on social position, and the contingency of their material form; the body schema is recognized in neither its historical sedimentation nor its plasticity, but as a “biological” or inborn type composed of essential traits. With respect to the world, the systems of diacritical difference, the histories of oppression and social structures that allow meaning to appear are seen only insofar as they are reduced to the attributes of objects. While these dimensions work in us and affect us, invisibly and unconsciously, allowing us to see, it is by means of their elision that the realm of visible objectivity is defined. This is to say that such dimensions—whether material, diacritical, historical or social, whether bodily or worldly—have affective but not “objective” existence. To rephrase Merleau-Ponty, they are “foreshadowed in our perceptual or practical field, . . . felt in our experience by no more than a certain lack” (PhP 153/179), as “fecund negative[s],” Merleau-Ponty later says (VI 263/316). The realm of visible objectivity is, then, narrower than that of affectivity. It is thus through affect that the receptivity of sight—delimited in objectifying vision to that which can be made object—is opened up to other dimensionalities (as we shall see in section four).

In his discussion of the workings of objectifying vision, Merleau-Ponty evokes two interrelated forms of invisibility.²⁶ There is the invisibility of the material and historical genesis of vision. This is the process by which vision is sedimented—a process that relies on, while forgetting, structures of habituality and historicity, as well as the contingency and givenness of bodily material disposition (the twoness of the eyes, the cross-blending of visual fields, and the uprightness of the human posture, etc.).²⁷ And there are what Merleau-Ponty calls the invisibles of the visible—the diacritical or formal conditions of the appearance of objects in the present. In “Eye and Mind,” these are the dimensions of color, line, depth and movement, a list which is by no means exhaustive and to which I think social structures and hierarchies of power should be added. (EM 181/67) The two senses of invisibility both

contribute to the formation of the visible and the naturalization of objectifying vision. Indeed, I will argue that it is impossible to separate them—not only in the case of social positionality, which is diacritically, temporally and materially experienced, but also in the case of Merleau-Ponty's examples of color and line. Critical vision will need to reveal both for reasons I will explore below.

II. *Hesitation*

In both “Eye and Mind” and Bergson’s “La perception du changement,” critical vision is to be located in the figure of the painter. Curiously, while both Bergson and Merleau-Ponty point to painters as exemplars of non-objectifying and dilated vision, they attribute this difference to the painter’s distraction or disengagement from the world.²⁸ Though problematic if understood as a disengagement from the social and political world (a disengagement that Merleau-Ponty seems to be claiming for Cézanne in “Eye and Mind”), I believe that there is another way of understanding the painter’s so-called distraction. The painter, says Bergson, sees for the sake of seeing;²⁹ seeing is not subsumed to the ends of objectivating, goal-oriented action. As such, the imperatives of objectification are bracketed to reveal the habituality and historicity that found them and the invisible conditions that make them possible. The painter is therefore not disconnected from the world, with all that this implies of distance and retreat. Rather, the painter’s vision displays a different kind of attention to the world, to visibility and to life. It is an attention that seeks to remain within the proximity of seeing and seen, and tries to decenter, to question, this relation from within. (VI 138/182) But this attention takes the form of *hesitation*; for it is hesitation that creates an opening in habits and makes them visible for themselves and within the world. Hesitation questions the seamless mirroring of seeing in the seen; it reveals the difference and non-coincidence within vision itself. Hesitation is the surprised revelation of a blindspot in vision, of invisibles to which vision is indebted, of an affective field wider than that of visible objects. Hence the painter’s vision is tentative and searching when compared to objectifying vision, but it is not disinterested.³⁰ It follows a higher “urgency,” says Merleau-Ponty (EM 161/15), that of seeing to the constitutive and forgotten conditions of vision itself.

The appeal to hesitation raises, however, several concerns. For hesitation is an ambiguous phenomenon. Though hesitation may allow an awareness, interruption and reconfiguration of habit (as we shall see in section four), the experience of hesitation also seems to undermine agency—one’s sense of oneself as an “I can”—and to install a passivity at the heart of the activity of the embodied subject. More problematically, hesitation tracks social positionality; those in positions of privilege seem to hesitate the least, whereas

hesitancy in bodily movement and action tends to characterize the lived experience of systematic oppression. Iris Marion Young, in her landmark essay “Throwing Like a Girl,” shows how “feminine” bodily comportment is typically one of hesitation in our culture.³¹ Young provides a compelling phenomenological account of the inhibited and contradictory modalities of “feminine” movement and action. She shows how feminine bodily existence perceives two sets of (im)possibilities with respect to the same intentional goal: an “I cannot”—socially constituted as “feminine” yet experienced by women as self-referred—is superposed upon an imaginary and generalized, supposedly neutral or human, “I can.” These contradictory projections result in a lived tension within women’s bodies in the context of teleological action; one feels oneself, anonymously and generally, called on to act, yet at once feels one’s concretely feminine body to be incapable of such action.³² Young’s analysis of the sources of this specifically feminine “I cannot” points to the role of habituation; such socialization is both privative (enforced by lack of practice) and “positive,” so that in growing up *as a girl* in our culture one learns a style of acting that is hesitant, fragile, and constantly self-referred—one learns to move through the world *like a girl*.³³ But habituation arises within a social horizon that motivates particular habits and that habit reinforces and actualizes in turn. Hence the root of “feminine” hesitancy is located, for Young, in the societal and patriarchal gaze that systematically positions “feminine” bodies as mere objects, and in response to which women come to live their bodies in such terms.³⁴

To take seriously, following Young, the inhibiting effects of social objectification on women’s agency means understanding the hesitancy of “feminine” embodiment as more than the tentative suspension of habit. This hesitancy has to be conceived not as the indeterminacy within habit, but as the *overdetermination* of “feminine” body schemas and habits. This overdetermination can be linked to the exclusionary and “blind” logic of objectifying vision that “cannot see otherwise than objects” (section one). In particular, the objectifying and patriarchal gaze operates a certain exclusion with respect to “feminine” bodies, which it defines as mere bodies, objects rather than subjects.³⁵ It is by feeling oneself seen in this way, and living this exclusionary logic whether in complicity or in resistance, that “feminine” embodiment becomes instituted and felt as tension and alienation. In contrast to Young, however, I would claim that this tension is produced not only from the “I cannot” that my body takes up as “feminine” body, but also from the imaginary and unactualizable “I can” which is, at the same time, adopted as the norm of bodies in general. The contradictory “feminine” bodily modality that holds together “I can” and “I cannot” with respect to the same goal owes, then, to the paradox of a social order that presupposes the general seamlessness of *the* lived body while excluding certain categories of bodies as those that “cannot.” It is in its social reference, and not in any inherent ambiguity within “feminine” bodies, that the key to the hesitancy described by Young can be found.³⁶

Questioning Young's (and Merleau-Ponty's) model of the "I can" reveals the possibility of another hesitation, one that has been covered over by the idealized seamlessness of the phenomenological "I can." I think it is important to distinguish two kinds of hesitation here, with different structural roots and bodily reverberations—hesitations that call for different phenomenological accounts. For there is a hesitation that stems from the *indeterminacy* within habit, from the susceptibility to be affected by that which cannot be captured in the logic of objects (as in Bergson's and Merleau-Ponty's examples of painters). This hesitation is not a response to vision overdetermined by objectification; it stems, rather, from the affective force of dimensions and the felt weight of historicity and habits that sustain vision while remaining invisible. To glimpse these dimensions is to witness the virtual multiplication of other ways of seeing and acting, of alternative routes to those being actualized through objectifying vision, routes that may have affective pull though not "objective" presence. Significantly, such hesitation does not come about through the contradictory superimposition of "I can" and "I cannot"; it is not reducible to such binary and exclusionary logic. But neither does this mean the proliferation of optimal and unobstructed "I can[s]." Rather, this hesitation stems from the constitutive passivity and affectivity *within* the "I can," its invisible infrastructure.³⁷ Here, the phenomenological model of the "I can" needs to be revised, as in Merleau-Ponty's later work, in order to imagine activity that is not opposed to passivity, agency that is also powerlessness, and vision that acknowledges its blindspots.³⁸

Recognizing this structural hesitation within vision and action allows us to re-read the imaginary and general "I can" in opposition to which the feminine "I cannot" is posited in Young's "Throwing Like a Girl." What is finally overlooked in Young's account is the way in which this normative "I can"—posited as human but in fact correlated to male bodies—itself relies on a certain "I cannot" that excludes other ways of seeing and acting.³⁹ This exclusion constructs the teleology of objectifying vision and action as "efficient" and "seamless"—eliding their contextual dependency, affectivity and passivity (as argued in section one). The dimensions—social, historical, material and diacritical—that make vision hesitate and that reveal its contingency are hidden from view. The bodily "self-reference" or self-awareness of hesitation is hence not always a limitation, a negativity that distracts from the goal at hand. Hesitation may constitute the attention needed for vision to become self-critical—for it to turn towards the invisibles that it takes for granted and to remember the habituality and historicity upon which it relies. Hesitation is, then, a response to, and an effort of openness towards, an affective field that is unrecognizable to the objectifying gaze. In this sense, hesitation would be a remedy for the blinders and the arrogance—to use Marilyn Frye's term—of objectifying vision.⁴⁰

III. *The Critical Vision of Painters*

Both Bergson and Merleau-Ponty take the painter's vision to be exemplary of the second kind of hesitation I have described—the hesitation whose possibility is inscribed within habitual action and vision. What is important to note is that the painter's hesitation, in delaying habitual action, opens the way from affectivity to memory. I believe that there are two mutually implicated paths that this critical memory must take: (i) through the diacritical and seemingly formal conditions of actual visibility—the structures, social and otherwise, that configure what we see (hence a memory of the present); and (ii) through the habitualities and sedimentations, the instituted ways of seeing and vertical historicity, that make my vision what it is in the present (hence a memory of the past, including possibly a memory of a past that has never been present for my vision). In other words, there is at once social positionality and the ways in which this is lived as habit, felt as affect, and enacted (or subverted) as embodied comportment. The relation between hesitation, affect and memory is a complex one, and I will appeal to Bergson in helping me work it out in the next section. But, for now, I should note that both memories are needed for critical vision.

“Eye and Mind” presents the primary role of the painter's vision to be that of making visible the invisible and diacritical dimensions of visibility (hence the first kind of memory). Even dimensions of visibility that could be read as material, affective or historical are read in purely diacritical terms. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, color becomes “less a color or a thing . . . than a difference between things and colors.” (VI 132/175) As Helen Fielding has shown in reading Luce Irigaray, this elides the expressive, affective and embodied dimensions of color.⁴¹ But line too is presented by Merleau-Ponty in a diacritical vein. In this, he explicitly contrasts his reading of Da Vinci's flexuous and sinuous line—the line that organizes and configures the physiognomy of a visible thing but that is irreducible to any of its merely visible lines—with Bergson's (and Ravaisson's) earlier readings. (EM 182-3/72-3) For Bergson, this line was a generating and living, temporal *élan* that materializes forms in its movement of expression.⁴² For Merleau-Ponty, however, the line generates a figure in its diacritical differentiation from the level it established for itself at the outset; the line is ultimately “autofigurative” (EM 181/69). Here, the line is not a style or rhythm of existence, nor is there any reference to the weight and materiality both of the hand and of the medium it is working over (Merleau-Ponty simply refers to the indifference of the white paper). The line hence appears arbitrary and conventional; the meaning it produces refers back only to the line itself. In my analysis, I mean neither to impose a dichotomy between the diacritical and material dimensions of vision, its form and matter, nor between synchrony and diachrony. Rather, my point is that dimensions of visibility must also be understood as materializing and sedimenting dimensions, as institutions that temporalize and spatialize, and hence as the formative media for bodies.⁴³

These dimensions do not only rely on the materiality of life, its affective susceptibility or *flesh*, and on the sustenance of media such as air, earth and sky, as Irigaray points out.⁴⁴ They themselves also have latency, historicity, and affective weight.⁴⁵ In this sense, color and line have material and historical flesh.⁴⁶

But why is a critical vision that is limited to making visible the diacritical dimensions of visibility (a memory of the present) insufficient? I want to suggest that this kind of critical vision is both too little and too much. It is too little in that it misses the material and historical grounds of vision—the institution of habits of seeing (both collective and individual) that materialize into my present vision. This past of habituation is the blindspot in vision that reflects and sediments its social reference, its partiality and its perspective as vision. It is through this past that a *way* of seeing, and of making visible, comes to be instituted as the system of visibility that counts. Through repetition and habituation, a particular order of difference and meaning becomes norm—a certain level becomes *the* level according to which we see, receding itself from visibility. But it is not only to individual bodies that habit belongs; social horizons themselves become habitual and institutional.⁴⁷ In this sense, social horizons motivate habits and are, in turn, naturalized through them.⁴⁸ This circularity between habit and institution, bodies and social horizons, means that vision is neither mere social construction nor individual accomplishment, but an institution and a historicity that is always taken up and resumed.

When it forgets this blindspot of social and bodily habituation, critical vision overreaches its bounds; it becomes too much. It forgets its historicity and contingency and takes itself to be absolute. As Merleau-Ponty notes in “Eye and Mind,” the painter’s vision carries this risk. In Merleau-Ponty’s account, painters not only want to see more of the visible, they want to see only in terms of the visible. In this sense, they seek to make visible that which was invisible in order to see it.⁴⁹ Thus, “[p]ainting awakens and carries to its highest pitch a delirium which is vision itself, for to see is *to have at a distance* [*avoir à distance*]; painting spreads this strange possession to all aspects of Being, which must in some fashion become visible in order to enter into the work of art.” (EM 166/27) The risk is then twofold. First, that the invisible diacritical conditions of visibility, in being made visible in painting, be re-appropriated as objects. This would subsume invisibility and alterity to objectifying vision. Instead of destabilizing the objectifying habits of seeing, it would confirm them, extending them into a new realm of potential objects. Second, the risk is that visibility be extended to what in principle cannot be visible, to invisibles that are not part of the visual field and that cannot be translated into visible terms without distortion of their being. The risk is that vision, in its critical function of revealing hidden conditions and making visible the secrets of visibility, become totalizing. The corrective to this, I want to suggest, is that critical vision in its project of making visible, remember its historicity, habituality and affective sources. It must remember

the blindspot that it cannot make visible directly, but can only marginally see in its moments of hesitation. Without this, critical vision no longer hesitates; it no longer waits in affective openness for what it cannot see, but becomes an “unhearing [*sourde*] historicity”—a totalizing project.⁵⁰ (EM 189/90)

Such a project, oddly unsituated and disembodied, corresponds to seeing social structures in general terms, but seeing neither my own position and complicity within them, the specific histories of oppression that have instituted them, nor the habits and modes of embodiment to which they lead. There is a certain blindness in this way of seeing others that reduces their lives to their positions within social structures, forgetting the heterogeneity of the ways in which these structures are taken up, lived, repeated and subverted—a heterogeneity which means that these structures are not monolithic but shift, albeit with a certain inertia or lag.⁵¹ Hesitation is needed, then, not only in order to reveal the play of social structures and diacritical dimensions, but also in order to show how the weight of multiple pasts, of historicity and habituation, institute and naturalize these structures while at once fracturing their consistency and stability.⁵² In this sense, hesitation can reveal the temporality and contingency of instituting horizons and norms of meaning, a temporality which can be mobilized in individual and social transformation. Thus, to develop another direction in which Merleau-Ponty describes the painter’s vision in “Eye and Mind,” the project of critical ethics would not be to see others in exhaustive (and hence inevitably reductive) ways, but to see according to other ways of seeing, elided in the logic of objectifying vision; it would see according to, or with, others. But for this to be possible, critical-ethical vision must become aware of its contingent habituation, of the weight of the past.

IV. *Critical Vision as Affect, Hesitation, Memory*

I have suggested that critical vision is synonymous with hesitation, and that this opens our eyes to affectivity and to memory. But what is the relation between these terms and how can hesitating become a productive power?

In *Matière et mémoire*, Bergson notes that affection is felt when the body hesitates in the course of its habitual actions. The causal sequence of excitation and habitual response is interrupted and an affect takes its place. Affect not only *is* hesitation—i.e., affect takes the place of habitual action and hence delays that action. Affect also prefigures the delayed habit, making it visible as a future course of action among others in the world. Affect thus makes visible the contingency and sedimentation of habitual actions and perceptions, as well as their plasticity. Affect arises within the sensori-motor schema of the body and depends on habit even as it destabilizes it, making possible the improvisation of different futures. But affect should not be understood to be interposed into the stream of habit from without, so that hesitation would be accidental to a habituality that was idealized as seamless

"I can." Affectivity is, rather, inscribed within the infrastructure of habituality; it belongs to the temporality upon which habituation relies and which both grounds habits and renders their transformation possible, albeit also difficult. Through affect, the body waits before acting; it has the time not only to perceive, but also to remember.⁵³ It is in this way that affect symbolizes, for Bergson, a body's hold on time, its duration. For to feel is to no longer repeat the past automatically, but to imagine and remember it.⁵⁴ In affect the past is remembered, rather than being repeated. Habit becomes visible in memory.

It is in this sense that affect constitutes a singular and positive phenomenon—an experience different in kind from that of perception with which it is nevertheless inextricably related.⁵⁵ Bergson says: "Il y a dans la douleur quelque chose de positif et d'actif, qu'on explique mal en disant, avec certains philosophes, qu'elle consiste dans une représentation confuse."⁵⁶ Notably, affect arises not in opposition to passivity, but could be described, in paradoxical terms, as the activity of that passivity itself. In Bergson's words, affect is "un effort impuissant."⁵⁷ The delay that defines affect is at once powerlessness and generativity. On the one hand, affect appears not to belong to the subject herself but to be that which she undergoes; on the other hand, affect is an interruption of habitual action, a delay that is generative of recollection and that can open within habit other ways of seeing and acting. The structure of affect undermines, then, several dichotomous schemas: it lies at the hinge of passivity-activity, but also of inside-outside, or more accurately, of self-affection and hetero-affection.⁵⁸ It is here that the importance of affect for critical vision can be located; for affectivity is not only the openness onto an outside, but also the self-aware, and lived-through, undergoing of that alterity. This "self-reference" of affect allows the body itself, its temporal, material and habitual structures, to be glimpsed on the horizon of experience. For Bergson, this is because affection defines not only an ineffective and blind effort (from the point of view of the teleology of action), but an effort where the body works on itself in response to the world; it is a local and situated response to the context in which the body finds itself.⁵⁹ When we recall, in addition, that affectivity is a susceptibility that goes beyond what can be cognized in the logic of objects, an openness to that which may register as feeling rather than representation (see section one), the critical potential of hesitation comes to view.

The productive power of hesitation stems from affect and leads to memory. I believe that this critical memory serves three purposes in the context of habit. First, it is the memory of habituation; it serves to contextualize and historicize our habits, to show them as habits. Secondly, the memory itself is already a destabilization of habit; it replaces the performance of habit. And, thirdly, memory connects habit to its dynamic temporal and affective ground, to the duration that makes habit possible, even while it is being continually reconfigured by habits acquired. This duration is more than any given habit; it is, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, the prepersonal dimension of embodiment that permits not only habit-formation, but also change.⁶⁰ It is a temporality that

keeps habits open, despite their seeming solidification in repetition; indeed, it keeps habits open because within temporal becoming each repetition is never quite the same. This temporality or duration, we could say, at once structures and fractures habituality. Through this dimension, the body's affectivity—its openness to alterity in experiences of waiting, wonder and surprise—is sustained. This affectivity—which was closed down in objectifying vision to the strict equivalent of habitual anticipations and delimited by a socially instituted “I cannot”—can thus open onto other ways of seeing and of being, other ways of enduring.

There are, then, two ways in which objectifying habits of seeing can become visible in the hesitation of critical vision. *Marginally and affectively*, the delayed objectification is prefigured but not explicitly seen. This is not to say that what is seen escapes the habitual schemas of objectifying vision, but that the seeming coincidence between my habits of seeing and the visible is decentered, revealing these habits and their social reference as the constitutive margin or frame of my field of vision. The prefiguration of habit in affect accomplishes this decentering by expressing the ways in which my vision is already ahead of itself, already constituting and anticipating the seen according to its habitual schemas. At the same time, *memorially*, the historicity and temporality of habit are recollected—keeping habit open and allowing both for re-appropriation and change.

In questioning objectifying habits of seeing, critical vision is, however, confronted with certain limitations. It may destabilize the habits and horizons from which it arises, but only to a degree. For the past that critical vision opens onto is one to which habits of seeing have already contributed. In this sense, memory of the past may destabilize habits only to find itself again re-absorbed and reconfigured by them. In particular, the powerlessness that affectivity insinuates into lived experience may be taken up not as openness to alterity, but in an attitude of self-conservation and closure—especially when it is one's privileged positionality and the imaginary seamlessness of one's bodily capacities that are at stake.⁶¹ In response, critical vision needs to become an attentive effort to hold open the moment of hesitation—in both its powerlessness and generativity—a little longer. This is both a negative effort to delay objectifying seeing and acting and a positive effort to remain affectively open to other historicities and rhythms, other affective energies and ways of seeing, that can come to challenge my own. Here, we glimpse ways in which critical vision is also ethical—making possible a transformation in habits of seeing.

V. *Seeing Ethically, Critically*

“Eye and Mind” speaks not only of painters' visions but also of the vision of painting. In the experience of seeing a painting, Merleau-Ponty says: “I would be at great pains to say *where* is the painting I am looking at. For I do

not look at it as I do at a thing; I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that *I see it*.” (EM 164/23) Paintings, and cultural productions more generally, teach us to see differently. In order to see them, we must learn new habits of seeing; we must learn to see *with* them. In this context, Merleau-Ponty notes that “painting deposits in [us] a feeling of profound discordance, a feeling of mutation.” (EM 179/63) Painting, it seems, has its own affective atmosphere, its own way of addressing us that disrupts our habitual rhythms and perceptions. It interpolates us affectively, even before we can see it as an object. It taps into our hesitations with divergent affects that belong to a different temporality and historicity than ours—to a different institution of vision and configuration of visibility—and that we cannot simply reappropriate in the same habits of objectifying seeing. Painting, then, motivates habits of non-objectifying and fluid seeing. It asks of us a lateral and receptive seeing, what Mauro Carbone calls “*secondar*,” that takes otherness as its motive rather than its object.⁶²

I think that critical-ethical vision can be understood on this model of seeing with. While “Eye and Mind” is only suggestive in this regard, the concept of lateral passivity in Merleau-Ponty’s lecture course on “Le problème de la passivité” allows us to develop this theory in productive ways. On this account, *seeing with* would not be a “frontal” or direct vision of another:

[La] passivité [est] non pas frontale, envers un autre *Je*, mais congénitale au *je*, en tant que quelque chose lui advient, *i.e.* suscite redistribution de son paysage, de ses investissements, des dimensions de son être au monde; *i.e.* introduit dans un certain niveau, et affecté selon lui de certaines valeurs et significations, [il] finit par faire basculer le niveau (exp. de Wertheimer) et le réorganiser.⁶³

This is a description of how a particular level, way of seeing or organization of the visual field, that had been *the* level according to which we saw comes to be reorganized, transformed. The motivation for this reorganisation of visibility is complex; Merleau-Ponty speaks, on occasion, of the “adversity” of events that are inassimilable to the “normal” organisation of the field and that cannot be made sense of through the given level.⁶⁴ These are events for which we cannot account from within our instituted system of meaning—events that reveal, if we are open to them, the fractures in the coherence of the visual field. There are two ways of responding to such events: by maintaining the normative organisation of the field and refusing to see them (a “pathological” response according to Merleau-Ponty), or by receptively allowing an event to insinuate itself into our vision as the dimension according to which the visual field is restructured—thus changing how we see.⁶⁵

Pas de sens donné avec l’événement: on peut ruser, maintenir en vigueur l’ancien schéma praxique . . . réprimer. Mais s’il n’y a pas de sens donné, il y a des

événements dont on ne peut empêcher l'inscription historique qu'en refusant de les voir, qui sont inassimilables pour notre système, qui refusent notre *Sinngebung*. Le choix de la maintenir sera alors pathologique. . . . [Il y a] passivité jusque dans l'activité: c'est parce que dans le niveau ancien telle direction était donnée comme "oblique" qu'en m'installant en elle comme "normale" je modifie le sens de tout le reste et établis un nouveau niveau . . . [Et il y a] activité jusque dans la passivité: hors certains cas limites où l'événement n'est pas assimilable, je pourrais toujours par régression maintenir mon niveau ancien.⁶⁶

The transformation of the visual field is thus not one of radical discontinuity for Merleau-Ponty, for the new level was "obliquely" or tangentially implicated in the old.⁶⁷ This would seem to limit the novelty and difference that can be recognized within the visual field. It seems to imply a conservatism of the visual field, whereby possibilities for seeing differently are delimited in advance by the very norms that refuse the radically new. On this reading, the inassimilable difference of an event would bar it from becoming the dimension according to which we see; that is, we could not come to see such events on their own terms. As inassimilable affects they remain unconscious. Though this is one reading to which Merleau-Ponty's text lends itself, I think another reading is possible. While it is always possible, according to Merleau-Ponty, to maintain habitual ways of seeing, this insistence in response to inassimilable events (and the corresponding exclusion of other ways of seeing) should be read as pathological. Here it becomes important to distinguish two senses of *seeing with*.

First, there is a sense in which we can say, with Merleau-Ponty, that we always *already* see with others. These others form the invisibles that have already been laterally implicated in my field of vision. This is a "history by contact," to use Merleau-Ponty's expression. (EM 179/63) Since it cannot see other than the objects in front of it, objectifying vision elides this lateral passivity and dependence on others. I believe that this forgetting should be understood to be double: (i) What is forgotten is my debt to others who have accompanied the development of my vision, specifically parental, communal and proximate others from whom I have learned how to see; this invisible "weight of my past" institutes a particular way of seeing as normative for me.⁶⁸ (ii) The exclusion of the non-familiar and "alien" other, whose difference may be represented as exotic or threatening in itself, but whose abjection plays a constitutive role in how I come to see; this corresponds to the structural elision of other ways of seeing and being that do not "make sense" within my instituted level. I want to claim that, while the first form of forgetting institutes the level according to which I see based on the *appropriation* of the flesh of others to whom my attachment is rendered invisible,⁶⁹ the second forgetting means that even *excluded* others are "obliquely" and structurally inscribed within the field of vision, as its "constitutive outside" (to use Judith Butler's term). The "inassimilability" of the other cannot be understood to mean absolute difference or separation in

this case, as if others were new lands to be discovered. Rather, those defined as “alien” are already presupposed within the workings of objectifying vision, even as they are relegated to its “inassimilable” and unrecognized margins.

Objectifying vision is thus reductive of lateral difference as relationality—by rendering familiar, and indifferent, the otherness upon which I depend, and by positing as absolute and alien differences in opposition to which my identity becomes defined. In this way, difference is either subsumed to identity or projected as opposition. In both cases, what is elided is the lateral dependence of my vision upon others whose affective influence is appropriated or denied without any recognition of excess. These two attitudes towards otherness are interconnected: the self-certitude and supposed neutrality of objectifying vision requires that its roots in certain social-historical ways of seeing, certain others, remain invisible; and it is this self-forgetfulness of partiality and contingency that refuses to recognize other ways of seeing and being, excluded as “inassimilable.”

Second, there is an important sense in which to *see with* others must be an attentive effort—an effort that I have described in this paper as one of hesitation. In this light, the first sense of seeing with others is revealed to be ignorance of others; it is a willful gaze that takes itself to be an atomistic and unhesitating “I can see,” ranging over the visible by disregarding its affective roots in sociality and history. The insistence on maintaining the normative schema of objectifying vision, in response to an affective complexity that cannot be reduced to that level, would thus be “pathological” on Merleau-Ponty’s terms.⁷⁰ But, while Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on “Le problème de la passivité” speak of the disruption that comes to vision from inassimilable events, it is unclear how the critical self-awareness of vision—with regards to its social and historical horizons and its dependency on others—plays a role in this transformation. As I have argued, the weight of the past is brought to light through the critical memory that arises in hesitating. Hesitation makes visible, in indirect and lateral ways, the processes of habituation, identification and exclusion involved in the institution of the level according to which I see. Hesitation thus installs an interval through which both forms of otherness, elided in objectifying vision, can be glimpsed. Through the memory of vision’s appropriation of the flesh of “proximate” others, of its belonging to a social-historical horizon, the partiality of this vision and its exclusion of “alien” others come to light. These must be taken together, I believe. For it is through critical hesitation that the motivation to hold vision open to other ways of seeing and being can be understood. As Merleau-Ponty notes, it is always possible to refuse to see events deemed inassimilable, to abide in a kind of ethical closure towards others and the world. This refusal, however, emerges from a pathological rigidity that is a feature of objectifying vision, as we saw in section one: the disavowal of the invisibles upon which vision relies, of the affectivity that mitigates the power of the “I can see.” What is interrupted in hesitation is, finally, this affective closure of objectifying vision.

To see with others, in this second critical and ethical sense, takes up, within the intersubjective field, the sense of *seeing with* that Merleau-Ponty had found in paintings and cultural productions in “Eye and Mind.” This would not be to see the other as an object in one’s field of vision, nor to take the other as an instrument of one’s vision; it is not even to see the other as “other.” It is to attempt to see according to a different affective atmosphere, to see with temporalities and memories revealed as positioned differentially within the field of vision—concrete historicities that have become invisible by being either subsumed to, or excluded from, my visual field. Critical-ethical vision cannot therefore be a matter of coinciding with the vision of the other, however familiar that other may be supposed to be. There is no question here of seeing “through the eyes of the other.” For this would be to try to reappropriate another’s experience in an arrogant gesture made possible only from a position of privilege. More so, this gesture takes for granted the already constituted figure of the other—as familiar or alien—leaving unquestioned the process of identification and objectifying exclusion upon which this figure relies. Such a gesture inevitably reduces the other’s experience to the representational schemas and habits of seeing that define my objectifying vision—regressively maintaining the normative organization of the field of vision.⁷¹

But what if, instead of attempting to see through the eyes of the other, I were to recognize my own eyes as already other? This is the promise that Merleau-Ponty’s account of lateral passivity holds: to glimpse the intercorporeal, social and historical institution of my own vision, to remember my affective dependence on an alterity whose invisibility my vision takes for granted. This is to recognize, as Irigaray has noted, the obligation of a shared vision.⁷² Such shared vision is not only indicated by painting, it is there in the invisible everydayness of our co-existence with others.⁷³ What is needed in order to recognize this is not simply a philosophical reflection on vision but a shift in practices of seeing—a change at the level of habits of seeing to interrupt the seamlessness of objectifying representation and the exclusions this implies. Such a change finds its grounds in, and is motivated by, the affective dimensions that objectifying vision has elided but upon which it must continue to rely. Yet if these dimensions are not to be again assimilated to the logic of objects, if others are not again to be instrumentalized by objectifying vision, then a transformation in habits of seeing and in the social horizons that engender them is called for. This requires a seeing that is attentive. More than a momentary openness, this is a difficult effort of co-existence. More than mere looking, this is a seeing that listens, checks and questions, that is critically watchful as well as ethically responsive.⁷⁴

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NOTES:

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- 1 I am not looking in this paper for "a second or figurative meaning of vision," but for other ways of seeing with our bodies and our eyes. Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. C. Lefort, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 145; *Le visible et l'invisible, suivi de notes de travail*, établi par C. Lefort (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), 191. Henceforth cited as VI with English then French pagination.
- 2 Linda Martín Alcoff, "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 272.
- 3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 229; *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1945), 265. Henceforth cited as PhP with English then French pagination.
- 4 Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 46-8.
- 5 It should be clear that this is a different enterprise than that of resorting to the absurdity of "color-blindness," which simply serves to veil the mechanisms of racism and racializing perception, and so claims to return to a more direct vision without addressing the mechanisms of normalizing vision.

- 6 Linda Martín Alcoff, “Habits of Hostility: On Seeing Race,” *Philosophy Today*, Volume 44, SPEP supplement 2000, 38. See also “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 281.
- 7 Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 219-224.
- 8 What I am calling *critical vision* in this paper is not the “second order or critical vision” that Merleau-Ponty criticizes in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (PhP 226/262). In the sense in which “critical vision” in the *Phenomenology* has as its function the analytical fragmentation and reification of the perceptual field into sensory qualities, my notion of critical vision as affective and dynamic shows precisely the abstraction of such a view. It should, however, be noted that to the degree to which Merleau-Ponty’s description of “critical vision” in the *Phenomenology* is itself ambiguous—at times attributed to the painter (226-7/262) and at other times to the natural scientific attitude (226/261)—a link to Merleau-Ponty’s later and more positive account of the painter’s vision may be possible. It would then be necessary to recognize a shift between the *Phenomenology* and “Eye and Mind,” whereby the “natural attitude of vision” (PhP 227/262), with which the *Phenomenology* often identifies, becomes critically self-aware and recalls its own “naturalization” and objectification.
- 9 David Michael Levin, *The Philosopher’s Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 171.
- 10 Following bell hooks, Oliver is clear that loving eyes must also be critical and that the work of vision involves critical reinterpretation (*Witnessing*, 219). Though in “Habits of Hostility” Alcoff seems to advocate an ethical vision, “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment” insists on both objectivist and subjectivist approaches to contextualism about race (270-271).
- 11 I am grateful to Gail Weiss for this crucial point. In this sense, self-critique and ethics must be understood to be co-conditional within critical-ethical vision. Ethics proceeds through self-critique, and self-critique risks falling into narcissism and totalization without the openness to an otherness irreducible to the self. In defense of using two terms, my methodology in what follows is to imaginatively extend each dimension or tendency of vision to its breaking point, in order to show how it cannot be the transformative vision it is without the other.
- 12 For more on subjectivity and subject-position, see Oliver, *Witnessing*, 17.
- 13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception and other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history and politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–90; *L’Œil et l’Esprit* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964). Henceforth cited as EM with English then French pagination.
- 14 Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire: Essai sur la relation du corps à l’esprit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1896); *La pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1938).
- 15 My choice of texts requires some explanation. “La perception du changement” is a curious essay for Bergson—for whom the alternative to perception is usually an intuition, more spiritual than sensible. In this essay, however, he is passionate in proposing a dilation of vision—not only as philosophical method but also as an enrichment of everyday lived experience. “Eye and Mind” is a curious essay for Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of vision are generally descriptive rather than evaluative (see *Phenomenology of Perception* with a few exceptions). But in “Eye and Mind” we find a systematic criticism of “normal” or profane vision and the explicit proposal of a corrective (in the form of the painter’s vision).
- 16 In all this, it will be important to ask how it is that vision can go beyond its habitual and normalized functioning: how can vision come to see differently? For this to be possible, vision must find alternatives from within its own structure and genealogy (I will point to the importance of hesitation in this regard). There cannot be an in-itself or “natural” vision—only a naturalized vision that forgets its origin in habit.

- 17 Alcoff, "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," 275-6.
- 18 To re-read Merleau-Ponty: "The visible things about us rest in themselves, and their natural being is so full that it seems to envelop their perceived being, *as if* our perception of them were formed within them." (VI 122/163; emphasis added)
- 19 Merleau-Ponty notes that "it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here." (EM 188/86-7) The invisibility of the process of naturalization sustains this ambiguity.
- 20 Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, 151-2.
- 21 As Alcoff notes, drawing on Gadamer: "The concept of horizon helps to capture the background, framing assumptions we bring with us to perception and understanding, the congealed experiences that become premises by which we strive to make sense of the world, the range of concepts and categories of description that we have at our disposal." Cf. *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95.
- 22 Here, we find hints of a critique of modernity and of perception as representation that echo Heidegger. In particular, "The Age of the World Picture" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
- 23 Though all institution involves forgetting for Merleau-Ponty, a productive forgetting that belongs to the process of sedimentation (cf. *Signes* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1960), 74), I want to claim that objectification involves a blindness that is more limiting. This is the exclusion—contained in the "I cannot" analyzed below—of affectivity and visibility beyond that of objects.
- 24 See my discussion of Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl" in section two.
- 25 See Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 78.
- 26 This is not a division that goes along the lines of body-world, but roughly of sedimentation-diacriticality, and sometimes of diachrony-synchrony, although these divisions are themselves problematic, as I will attempt to show below.
- 27 To recall the *Phenomenology*: "Man is a historical idea and not a natural species . . . Human existence will force us to revise our usual notion of necessity and contingency, because it is the transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of taking in hand [*reprise*]." (PhP 170/199)
- 28 See Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 161/14 and Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, 151.
- 29 Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, 152.
- 30 The painter's vision is characterized by affective openness; its receptivity is not circumscribed according to the already constituted field of objects. This recalls Picasso's famous claim: "Je ne cherche pas, je trouve" (cited in Edward S. Casey, "The World at a Glance" in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 154). In its openness to surprise and to the unexpected, the painter's vision may be likened to the "glance," whose phenomenology Casey has so well described. This is not to imply that hesitation is itself a style of seeing; rather, it is inscribed within the affective structure of vision, as will be discussed below.
- 31 Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 34.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 43-44.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 44-45. This is not to imply that women's responses to the patriarchal gaze are homogeneous, but that, whether complicit, resistant, or subversive, by being socially positioned as "feminine" one finds oneself already having to work within a field defined by this gaze and hence already hesitating, even as one seeks to overcome that hesitation.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 36 I agree here with Gail Weiss's critical reformulation of Young's account to highlight the "socially referred" character of bodily existence (Weiss) rather than its "self-reference" (Young). Cf. *Body Images*, 46-8.

- 37 The “I can” is always accompanied by a certain “I cannot” that serves to circumscribe and set limits to the field of my possible actions in the world. But, as Young points out, “I can” and “I cannot” are in this case only juxtaposed; it is their superimposition that gives rise to the contradictory modalities of “feminine” bodily existence (*On Female Body Experience*, 37). The passivity within the “I can” that I wish to point to here is more than the external limitation of a juxtaposed “I cannot.”
- 38 For Merleau-Ponty’s attempts to overcome the activity-passivity dichotomy, see *L’Institution, La Passivité, Notes de cours au Collège de France, 1954-1955* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2003), 250. Leonard Lawlor develops this notion of powerlessness within life in *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 146.
- 39 Young offers her own critique of this tendency to treat the masculine as neutral measure, in “Throwing like a Girl: Twenty years later” in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), 286–90.
- 40 See Marilyn Frye, “In and Out of Harm’s Way: Arrogance and Love” in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983), 52–83. In other words, such hesitation would be a critical corrective to the exclusionary logic, the “I cannot see otherwise than objects,” of objectifying vision.
- 41 Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis in his later work on color as a purely diacritical dimension of visibility has been read by Irigaray, and shown by Fielding, to be a forgetfulness of the expressivity and affectivity of materiality. Cf. Helen Fielding, “‘Only Blood Would Be More Red’: Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty and the Ethics of Sexual Difference,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 32 (2), May 2001: 147–159.
- 42 Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, 264–5.
- 43 Véronique Fóti points to Merleau-Ponty’s quest for an “aesthetics of gravity,” one called for by his philosophy of the *flesh* but that his transcendental reading of vision elides. Cf. *Vision’s Invisibles: Philosophical Explorations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 77, 79.
- 44 Luce Irigaray, “To Paint the Invisible,” trans. Helen Fielding, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37 (2004), 401–2.
- 45 Although Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the diacriticality of the human body in a working note to *The Visible and the Invisible*—describing the twoness of the body as that through which “the use of the diacritical” becomes possible (VI 217/270)—the affective weight of diacritical dimensions is rarely mentioned. The exception to this is color and speech in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. See Michel Haar, “Painting, Perception, Affectivity,” trans. Véronique Fóti, in *Merleau-Ponty: Difference, Materiality, Painting*, ed. Véronique Fóti (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996), 179, 188.
- 46 For an analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s account of color that, I believe, goes in this direction by showing how color cannot be a formal totalization but is already *expression*, see Galen A. Johnson, “Thinking in Color: Merleau-Ponty and Paul Klee” in *Merleau-Ponty: Difference, Materiality, Painting*, 169–176.
- 47 See Gail Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 75–86.
- 48 For an analysis of how the dimension of lighting according to which we see the visual field is itself motivated by the social horizon or institution of racism, so that our habits of seeing are structured according to racist schemas, see Helen Fielding, “White Logic and the Constancy of Color” in *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and Gail Weiss (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 80, 83.
- 49 “The painter’s world is a visible world, nothing but visible: a world almost demented because it is complete when it is yet only partial.” (EM 166/27)
- 50 As applied to painting in “Eye and Mind,” the term “unhearing historicity” is ambiguous. On the one hand, it points to the non-telological, oblique and open

- historicity of painting. On the other hand, it assigns painting to the ahistorical realm of “mute ‘thinking’” (EM 189/91), installing a radical difference between painting and language that goes against Merleau-Ponty’s own attempt to undermine such a division at the end of “Eye and Mind.” See Haar’s critique of the “anti-historicity” of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of art, in “Painting, Perception, Affectivity,” 179-180.
- 51 This echoes Alcoff’s call for “subjectivist,” and phenomenological, contextual approaches to race that begin from the everydayness of the lived experience of racialization and that would supplement “objectivist” approaches to race which focus on general definitions and structures. Cf. “Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 270-271.
- 52 See Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 124, and Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary*, 88.
- 53 Bergson notes: “J’examine les conditions où ces affections se produisent: je trouve qu’elles viennent toujours s’intercaler entre des ébranlements que je reçois du dehors et des mouvements que je vais exécuter, comme si elles devaient exercer une influence mal déterminée sur la démarche finale. Je passe mes diverses affections en revue: il me semble que chacune d’elles contient à sa manière une invitation à agir, avec en même temps, l’autorisation d’attendre et même de ne rien faire.” (*Matière et mémoire*, 11-12)
- 54 *Ibid.*, 251.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 56-57. Most importantly, Bergson notes that there is no perception without affection, since the body is not a mathematical point in space, but flesh. (*Ibid.*, 59)
- 56 *Ibid.*, 55. This quotation evokes the complex question of the role of pain in subject formation and annihilation, a question that I can only raise here.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 56. Acknowledging, in this way, the affective dimensions of experience may allow us to reconceive the powerlessness within the phenomenological “I can” as not merely privative (see section two).
- 58 Bergson notes that bodily affectivity is the limit at which hetero-affection and self-affection, outside and inside coincide: “Passez maintenant à la limite, supposez que la distance devienne nulle, c’est-à-dire que l’objet à percevoir coïncide avec notre corps, c’est-à-dire enfin que notre corps soit l’objet à percevoir.” (*Ibid.*, 57-58) “Et c’est pourquoi [la] surface [de mon corps], limite commune de l’extérieur et de l’intérieur, est la seule portion de l’étendue qui soit à la fois perçue et sentie.” (*Ibid.*, 58) In this regard, we find important phenomenological resemblances, but also ontological differences, between Bergson and Edmund Husserl’s *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, trans. Anthony J. Steinbock (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), avenues that I do not have space to develop here.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 58. Hence it is arguable that this effort is “effective” in a different direction—by giving rise to an awareness of one’s situation, to responses to that situation (whether defensive, complicit or resistant), and to thinking.
- 60 See Edward S. Casey, “Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty,” *Man and World*, 17 (1984): 279-297. For more on the temporality of the prepersonal, see my essay “‘A Past Which Has Never Been Present’: Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of the Prepersonal,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 38, 1 (2008): 41-71.
- 61 It may be asked whether hesitation is only a remedy for the arrogant vision of those in positions of privilege. What needs to be recalled here is Maria Lugones’s point that oppression is not an exclusive possession, but that one may be at once the object and agent of objectifying vision. I would add that critical vision has an important role to play in both cases; it does not only work to interrupt objectifying vision directed towards others, but may also question habitual and “interiorized” social categories through which one sees oneself and others of one’s social group. Cf. Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” in *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 421.
- 62 For Mauro Carbone’s notion of “*seconder*,” translated as “‘*complying with*,’ from within, the showing of the sensible itself,” see *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty’s A-Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 37; La

visibilité de l'invisible: Merleau-Ponty entre Cézanne et Proust (Hildesheim: George Olms Verlag, 2001), 177, 185.

- 63 Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution, La Passivité*, 249-250. The reference here is to an experiment by M. Wertheimer, *Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung*, *Ztschr. f. Ps.* 1912, cited in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, 248-9/287-9.
- 64 Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, La Passivité*, 250.
- 65 For more on Merleau-Ponty's notion of "dimension," see Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 174ff.
- 66 Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, La Passivité*, 250.
- 67 "Le nouveau niveau ne serait rien de défini sans ce qui l'a précédé, sans mon histoire." (*Ibid.*, 250)
- 68 *Ibid.*, 251.
- 69 This is an "arrogating" vision, to use Marilyn Frye's term (*The Politics of Reality*, 69). As Maria Lugones points out, such vision grafts the flesh of the other to myself, instrumentalizing the other and refusing to see her within her own "worlds" ("Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," 420-424).
- 70 This can be related to the way in which racializing perception, and racism and colonialism more generally, are pathological according to Frantz Fanon. Cf. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 10-11, 192.
- 71 Merleau-Ponty notes this danger: "to bring a vision that is not our own into account . . . it is always from the unique treasury of our own vision that we draw, and experience therefore can teach us nothing that would not be outlined in our own vision." (VI 143/188)
- 72 Irigaray, "To Paint the Invisible," 403.
- 73 I thank Moira Gatens for pointing this out to me.
- 74 See Mariana Ortega, "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color," *Hypatia*, 21, 3 (Summer 2006), 60-61. By invoking listening here, I mean to point to the synaesthetic openness of this vision.

Une phénoménologie de la vision critique-éthique : Merleau-Ponty, Bergson et la question du voir différemment

En référence à *L'œil et l'esprit* de Merleau-Ponty, à *Matière et mémoire* et à *La perception du changement* de Bergson, je pose la question des ressources disponibles dans la vision pour interrompre des habitudes objectivantes de la vision. Tant Bergson que Merleau-Ponty situent la possibilité de voir différemment dans la figure du peintre, je développe sur la base de leurs textes et en dialogue avec l'œuvre d'Iris Marion Young une phénoménologie plus large de l'hésitation sur la base de ce que j'appelle la « vision critique-éthique ». Je soutiens que l'hésitation s'enracine dans l'affect et mène à la mémoire critique. Dans l'hésitation, la coïncidence apparente entre mes habitudes de vision et le visible est décentrée, révélant ces habitudes et leur référence sociale en tant qu'horizon constitutif de mon champ de vision. L'hésitation, dès lors, fournit le moment phénoménologique à l'intérieur duquel la vision peut devenir d'un coup *critiquement attentive*, déstabilisant ses habitudes objectivantes, et *éthiquement responsive*, en recueillant ses fondements affectifs. Le critique et l'éthique sont ici inséparables. Au plan critique, cette vision est une conscience (*awareness*) des structures de l'invisibilité, diacritiques et habituelles, sociales et historiques auxquelles ma vision est endettée – des dimensions qui instituent des manières particulières de voir et d'être comme norme et en laissent d'autres de côté. Au plan éthique, c'est la reconnaissance du fait que voir est toujours déjà voir avec

d'autres – d'autres dont l'influence affective opère à l'intérieur de la vision, même lorsque leur existence est représentée de manière réductrice ou bien niée.

Una fenomenologia della 'visione etico-critica': Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, e la questione del vedere diversamente

Attraverso la lettura de *L'occhio e lo spirito* di Merleau-Ponty, ed altresì attraverso quella di *Materia e memoria* e delle lezioni su *La percezione del cambiamento* di Bergson, mi interrogo circa quali risorse abbia a disposizione la visione per interrompere l'oggettivazione delle abitudini del vedere.

Mentre Bergson e Merleau-Ponty individuano la possibilità del vedere in modo differente nella figura del pittore, io sviluppo per mezzo dei loro testi – nonché dialogando con il lavoro di Iris Marion Young – una più generale fenomenologia dell' 'esitazione', che sarà alla base di quella che chiamerò una "visione etico-critica". L' 'esitazione', sostengo, proviene dall'affetto e conduce ad una memoria critica. Nell' 'esitazione', l'apparente coincidenza fra i miei "abiti di visione" ed il visibile è decentrata, rivelando come questi abiti e il loro riferimento sociale siano l'orizzonte costitutivo del mio campo di visione.

L' 'esitazione', allora, fornisce il momento fenomenologico attraverso il quale la visione può diventare, ad un tempo, *criticamente vigile*, destabilizzando il suo abito obiettivante, ed *eticamente gravida di 'risposte'*, ricordando il proprio 'suolo' emotivo. Il critico e l'etico appaiono qui inseparabili. Criticamente, questa visione è una presa di coscienza della struttura dell'invisibilità, diacritica e abituale, sociale e storica, verso la quale la mia visione è debitrice – dimensione che istituisce particolari modi di visione e di essere come norma escludendone altri. Eticamente, si tratta di riconoscere che vedere è già vedere con altri – altri la cui influenza affettiva è operante nella visione, anche se la loro esistenza è riduttivamente rappresentata o negata.

