Chiasmi international, 17, 2015 (53–75)
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INCARNATED MEANING AND THE NOTION OF GESTALT IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY[1]

Although it is well known that Gestalt theory had an important impact on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy throughout his career, there is still no detailed study either of its influence on his ideas or of his own understanding of the notoriously polysemic notion of Gestalt. Yet, this notion is a key to Merleau-Ponty's fundamental project of overcoming "objective thought" and its inherent dichotomies. By indicating how signification or ideality can be immanent in, rather than opposed to, matter, it compels us to redefine both consciousness and the world it is bound up with. The aim of this article is to clarify Merleau-Ponty's notion of Gestalt against the historical background that he refers to, including Kurt Goldstein's theory of the organism that was crucial for his interpretation.

Although the importance of Gestalt theory for Merleau-Ponty is widely acknowledged, no one has yet examined its influence on his philosophy in detail. More often than not, monographs on his general thought mention its significance, but rather parenthetically, and the concept of Gestalt, with the related notions of form and structure, in Merleau-Ponty is rarely analysed against this background.[2] Moreover, the Gestalt theorists are sometimes made to include thinkers such as the neurologist Kurt Goldstein,[3] whose work was without doubt of great significance for Merleau-Ponty in this context, but precisely in that Goldstein criticised certain basic tenets of Gestalt theory.

Yet, the Gestalt functions as a key to certain fundamental issues in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, which need to be outlined. First, this notion has a pivotal function in Merleau-Ponty's struggle to overcome the classical dualisms of what he terms "objective thought." Second, there is the related question of meaning as an incarnated phenomenon, rather than as an impossible union of thought and extension, rationality and sensibility, where understanding the Gestalt is crucial: Renaud Barbaras claims that it serves as "the thing itself" in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.[4] Third, in order to clarify the epistemological as well as the ontological status of the body-proper in Merleau-Ponty's thought, I believe that we need to take the question of the Gestalt seriously, in particular through Goldstein's development of it.

Merleau-Ponty explicitly concerns himself with the notion of Gestalt in several periods of his career. First of all, there are the early project descriptions regarding the nature of perception from the early thirties, leading up to *The Structure of Behavior*,[5] where references to the Gestalt psychologists as well as to Goldstein abound – and also to several other theorists at the junction of philosophy and other disciplines. Then there is *Phenomenology of Perception*,[6] where in particular the first part deals with Gestalt theory and related themes. It is mainly in relation to these first works that Gestalt theory has been discussed (if at all) by Merleau-Ponty scholars.[7]

The second group of texts where Merleau-Ponty examines Gestalt psychology and Goldstein's organismic theory is constituted by the lectures at the Sorbonne, 1949-1952,[8] but and some extent the lectures at the Collège de France, from 1953 and onwards.[9] Finally, the notion of Gestalt appears in *The Visible and the Invisible*, in the context of his auto-criticism of his earlier philosophy.[10]

Barbaras distinguishes two phases in Merleau-Ponty's thinking of the Gestalt. To the first phase belong his two major phenomenological books where the notion is called upon as a "descriptive sample in order to criticise objective thought,"[11] but only from the point of view of a philosophy of (perceptual) consciousness. However, Barbaras contends that Merleau-Ponty's notion of Gestalt in this period is only negatively defined. There is no radical questioning of the basic categories – the conceptuality is "out of step with its object" – and for this reason Merleau-Ponty does not "fully exploit the philosophical potentialities of the form."[12] There is, as Barbaras stated in his first book, a lingering dualism in Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy.[13]

In the last period, by contrast, the notion of Gestalt is thought in and for itself and positively, according to Barbaras, in a way that forces a profound revision of our categories.

At this point, the Gestalt is described as "the system of equivalences around which every sensible thing is arranged," and must be spelled out through the notion of "pregnancy" (*prégnance*).[14] Further, Barbaras maintains that the corresponding subject should no longer be defined in terms of perceptual consciousness, but rather as a motor bodily subject.[15]

Although I believe that all these specifications with regard to the notion of Gestalt in Merleau-Ponty's last work are of utmost importance for a further elaboration of his thought, I don't agree that they point to a radical reversal in his philosophy.[16] The notion of "pregnancy" is of course a direct heir to the Gestalt principle of *Prägnanz* or the "tendency to best form," describing the organisation of the perceptual field into dynamic wholes whose meaning is autochthonous, rather than added by the intellect;[17] bodily motility was at the heart of the perceiving subject already in *The Structure*, and in the lectures at the Sorbonne Merleau-Ponty repeatedly emphasises the contribution of the Gestalt theorists when it comes to understanding the intimate connection between perception and action.[18] Further, the bodily schema that in *Phenomenology* served to clarify the body-proper and its circular relation to the surrounding world was precisely characterised as a "system of equivalences," and taken to be an alternative category that undermines the elementistic consciousness of objective thought (in the form of either empiricism or intellectualism).[19]

Challenging the Elementistic Paradigm

Generally speaking, the Gestalt psychologists took issue with the understanding of consciousness that still characterised scientific psychology in the beginning of the last century. According to this conception, all mental processes, such as perception, emotions and thought, and in the end human behaviour at large, can be divided into a number of ultimate elements or atoms, which in their turn should correspond to certain units at the physiological level.[20] Ultimately, this idea goes back to British empiricism, but the Gestalt theorists were equally in disagreement with rationalist, neo-Kantian or nativist views of perception, where form is imposed upon the material of the senses by the intellect.[21] For this reason, Merleau-Ponty uses their results also as an argument against intellectualism.

The aim of this paper is to clarify Merleau-Ponty's notion of the Gestalt, against the historical background that he refers to in developing his ideas. Contrary to Barbaras, I believe that the early works with their often detailed accounts of the experiments and tenets of the Gestalt and other theorists are essential for an understanding of this concept in the whole of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. However, this clarification is no easy task, since Merleau-Ponty

never gives a straightforward elucidation of his own perspective on the Gestalt, but rather a number of related statements that point in different directions. Further, he alternates between different terms that are sometimes, but not always, interchangeable: besides "form",[22] "structure," "whole," "constellation," etc.[23]

Gestalt theory properly so called was founded during the second decade of the 20th Century, by the philosopher Max Wertheimer, the psychologist Kurt Koffka and the physicist Wolfgang Köhler. They challenged psychology's current frame of reference and its terminology, but within a scientific context (in Germany, at this time, psychology was still a subdiscipline of philosophy).[24] Naturally, the sciences where experimental methods were already established served as a point of reference when scientific psychology was elaborated. The prevailing paradigm at this time implied, on the one hand, the presupposition that one must identify fundamental components and their governing laws, and on the other the demand that these laws be formulated in accordance with classical mechanics. According to the famous nineteenth century physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz, one should use physical models of explanation also for biological processes, and it was his so called "constancy hypothesis"[25] that still guided the study of perception in the beginning of the twentieth century. In conformity with this principle, stimulation of the sensory organs determines the content of perception in a univocal way: independently of the circumstances, a certain stimulus always gives rise to one and the same sensory reaction or sensation. The nervous system was considered as a network of separate pathways: Helmholtz compared it to a bundle of telegraph wires.[26]

However, the mechanistic view of perceptual processes will unerringly lead to a division of functions between those that are physiological or "peripheral" and the psychological or "central" ones; a dualism that is manifestly an heir to the classical dichotomy between matter and form or sensibility and reason.[27] The simple sensations postulated as the ultimate constituents of perception are nowhere to be found in real experience, which gives us complete phenomena – humans, animals, trees, clouds – rather than isolated impressions or conglomerates of these. Thus, the sensations are presumed to be the psychological counterparts to physiological stimuli, such as retinal images.

Under the assumption of the constancy hypothesis, even very simple perceptual phenomena are difficult to explain. In the well-known ambiguous figure of Rubin's vase one can see a white vase against a dark background or two dark profiles against a white background. Clearly, similar stimuli are here not followed by similar perceptions. Even though ambiguous figures of this kind may not be ubiquitous in our everyday experience,

organised wholes are fundamental to perception. But how do we proceed from the reception of individual sensations to grasping their organisation in a spatiotemporal order? Why do we divide up the world in the way we do – why do we apprehend, for instance, things and creatures as the primary constituents of the world, and not the spaces between them?[28]

In order to fill the gap between stimuli or sensations and the actual, organised perception where no such constituents can be distinguished, one resorted to explanations in terms of "local signs"[29] or "unnoticed sensations"[30] on the empiricist side, or judgmental errors on the intellectualist (to use Merleau-Ponty's term). As Aron Gurwitsch writes: "The constancy hypothesis always leads to the assumption of unperceived givens."[31] For this reason, the Gestalt psychologists undertake to challenge the elementistic presuppositions or "metaphors," [32] and thus a radical revision of the very categories of psychology and physiology.

The Origins of Gestalt Theory

The concept of *Gestalt* was introduced towards the end of the nineteenth century, by the Austrian philosopher Christian von Ehrenfels. In his paper "*Über 'Gestaltqualitäten*,"[33] this notion is used to characterise the organisation of perception that the empiricist theory cannot account for. Ehrenfels set out from the example of the melody, of chief importance also for the later Gestalt theorists.[34] In the simplest case, a melody is composed of a series of tones. The empiricist contends that the perception of a melody analogously consists of a succession of tone impressions. Can the melody's particular kind of unity be explained on the basis of the association of discrete tone impressions? It seems that melodies often appear as such even before my perceiving the separate tones. Should we therefore appeal to an intellectual function that synthesises the tones into a melody before they reach consciousness?

In order to show that the melody could not be understood as a summative compound of its elements, Ehrenfels used two principal arguments, which were later taken up by Köhler. First, presume that a series of tones t_1, t_2, t_3,…t_n is perceived by a subject *S* as a melody. Now suppose that *n* different subjects perceive the same series of tones such that each apprehends one tone impression. Should we then say that *S*, who perceives the whole melody, has something more than the *n* subjects taken together? [35] This was Köhler's first Gestalt criterion.[36] The Austrian philosopher, however, held this argument to be conclusive only if combined with another one, concerning the transposability of melodies that Ernst Mach had

pointed to, and that Köhler called Ehrenfels's second criterion.[37] The latter is supposed to give a proof of the existence of Gestalt qualities.[38]

Two summative composites resemble one another more, the more their components resemble one another, whereas we can play a melody in different keys, and speak of the same melody even though not one of the composite tones is the same. It is even far easier to recognise a melody than a tone; only few people have the capacity to perceive absolute pitch.[39] Hence, the melody must be something else than a sum of individual tones; it is characterised by a formal quality: what Ehrenfels calls a "Gestalt quality."

The conclusion is, as Paul Guillaume sums up Ehrenfels's position in his classical study of Gestalt theory, that a Gestalt "is *something other or something more than the sum of its parts*".[40] Now, we must be careful with these two depictions that here appear as synonymous. Ehrenfels holds that the Gestalt is something *new* in regard to the sensible qualities corresponding to the separate tones, although it is neither an additional sensation, nor a form of judgment. But what is new is at the same time something *more* than the tone sensations: a "Gestalt quality" is "a positive content of presentation bound up in consciousness with the presence of complexes of mutually separable […] elements."[41]

Now, in what way can a particular quality transform different collections of tones that have nothing in common into the same melody? If the individual sensations need not be the same in order to constitute the same melody, in what sense is the Gestalt quality dependent on the former? Why does a Gestalt quality pertain to certain complexes of sensations and not to others? Ehrenfels's argument touched empiricism to the quick, and had important theoretical consequences, since he believed that Gestalt qualities were not only found in the visual and auditory spheres – as spatial forms and melodies – but in all experiences, also non-perceptual ones.[42] As David Murray remarks,[43] Ehrenfels's study also anticipated Edgar Rubin's enquiries into the relation between figure and ground in perception,[44] which would be of such importance for the Gestalt psychologists – and for Merleau-Ponty. Notwithstanding, his conception of the Gestalt was insufficient for the researchers who in the beginning of the 20th century wanted to recast the very foundations of classical psychology.

The Constancy Hypothesis Refuted

The Gestalt theorists Wertheimer, Köhler and Koffka were clear that the Gestalt had to be something *else* than a sum of impressions: the very idea of experience consisting of ultimate constituents is called into question. Phenomena in our experience are intrinsically Gestalten

and their components must be explained with the total form as a basis, rather than the other way round. As Wertheimer writes: "what takes place in each single part [of the melody] already radically depends upon what the whole is."[45]

A decisive argument against the constancy hypothesis and for Gestalt theory was presented by Wertheimer in his article "*Experimentelle Studien über das Sehen von Bewegung*" from 1912, on the perception of motion.[46] Wertheimer discusses the so-called φ-phenomenon, discovered in experiments studying the stroboscopic effect. This effect had been known since the middle of the nineteenth century: when two immobile light sources flash alternately at certain intervals, a motion is seen between them.[47] Here the perception of movement does not have a counterpart on the stimulus side, where there are only two light flashes. Moreover, Wertheimer devised an apparatus where the apparent motion could be compared with real motion:[48] it turned out that the observers mostly could not distinguish between them, and if there was a difference one was described as a more forceful, vivid impression, a "better" motion than the other, namely the apparent motion![49] Furthermore: at a certain interval between the flashes[50] the observers reported that they saw a motion *without* a moving object – this was what Wertheimer called the "φ-phenomenon".[51]

Now, when Wertheimer examines the stroboscopic effect, he wants to understand what it means to see movement in general, not just clarify a perceptual curiosity. Starting, as he writes, with an "illusion" in order to understand perception as such, he is an advocate of phenomenological method: first we must examine "the psychologically given," and only afterwards ask what physical fact corresponds to it.[52]

In the stroboscopic experiment there are three principal types of perception: at a lower speed, one observes two successive flashes, at the optimal stage a distinct motion, at a higher speed two simultaneous flashes. But there are not, as the elementistic theories predict, a number of transitional stages between motion and rest. Rather, the experimental subjects spontaneously describe the motion in the interposed stages as "poorer [*slechtere*]," "not so pretty."[53] With the φ-phenomenon they are often struck with amazement over this motion that manifests itself in a very palpable, "obtrusive" way, but without *anything* that moves. It is a kind of pure "across [*hinüber*]." In other words, these phenomena are not mental add-ons to what is given, but appear in an objective manner, just as colours and forms, and consist in this "across" with its particular character: they have, writes Wertheimer, a *dynamic* nature.[54]

Whereas both empiricism and intellectualism held motion perception to be based on a continuous series of impressions of the object's spatial positions, Wertheimer shows that dynamic perception cannot be built up from static impressions. If the movement is slower and

the observer tries to focus on the moving object in all its phases, motion has even a tendency to vanish.[55] As Merleau-Ponty writes: "Movement disappears at the very moment when it conforms most to the definition given to it by objective thought."[56]

If Wertheimer's experiment produced a serious counterexample to the constancy hypothesis, Köhler's influential article from 1913, "On Unnoticed Sensations and Errors of Judgment," gave it a "damaging critique."[57] In order to explain the cases where perception did not correspond to stimuli in the way predicted by the constancy hypothesis, its defenders appealed to various unconscious phenomena as subsidiary hypotheses. Köhler now showed that such assumptions were untenable. The existence of unnoticed sensations could not be confirmed as by definition they are not perceived; their only function is to save the hypothesis. But "errors of judgment" cannot explain phenomena such as apparent motion; in cases where intellectual processes actually do come into play, they have the opposite effect: the illusion is reinforced. Köhler concluded that both these auxiliary assumptions "may inadvertently lead to the neglect of valuable material and the blocking of scientific progress."[58] In the end, we must give up the constancy hypothesis.

This hypothesis is also incompatible with another constancy that is a fundamental aspect of perception: that of perceptual objects with regard to transformations of the proximal stimuli. We perceive a human being at large distance as a person of normal size, despite the fact that the image on the retina is much smaller than when she is closer. We apprehend a colour as relatively constant even when the lighting changes, and so on. This constancy is of course not absolute, as anyone knows who has tried to choose the colour of wall paint, but if perceptual objects changed to the same degree as the proximal stimuli they would alter incessantly. Under the assumption of the constancy hypothesis, this fundamental trait of perception must be called an illusion. An easier solution, however, is that "we regard as the 'immediately given', and in any case as the biologically primary 'reality', not 'sensations', but […] *things*."[59]

Laws of Perception and their Foundation

Wertheimer's findings in the experiments on the φ-phenomenon were subsequently generalised into a characterisation of perception as such. A first step is made in 1914, when Wertheimer presents a rough idea of a Gestalt theoretical principle[60] that will become the crucial one of the "Gestalt laws" thought to govern perception, but also a principle for science in general.[61] This was the law of *Prägnanz*, and the idea behind it is that perception

strives for order, towards the "best" form under current circumstances: the simplest, most symmetrical, most stable.[62]

Just as optimal phases were described in motion perception, it can be shown that other structures are privileged in perception, for example the circle or the right angle, and that angles coming close to 90° are assimilated into it, as a "poorer" right angle. Angles intermediary between the right and the obtuse or the acute angles are perceived as "*unprägnant*," i.e., as a form that is not good or stable.[63] This tendency in perception to privilege certain forms cannot be explained in terms of earlier experience, since the angles we encounter in reality are rarely perfect right angles, and even less so if we consider the proximal stimuli. In order to spell out this principle, Wertheimer suggested certain specific laws that he believed govern the organisation of perception, mainly the factors of proximity, similarity, good continuation and closure.[64] These laws are not absolute but depend on the whole perceptual situation.[65]

The idea of wholes that could not be reduced to their constituent parts pointed towards a number of new research projects, and, more importantly, to a new way of doing scientific research. Thus, Köhler and Koffka extended the Gestalt concept to the study of animal and human behaviour.[66] Koffka had realised at an early stage that the notion of "stimulus" must be redefined: rather than a pattern of sensory excitations it is a function of the object in relation to the organism and its specific mental attitude.[67] Behaviour in general should not be understood in behaviourist terms, as sums of conditioned reflexes, but as organised whole-processes.

The Theory of Isomorphism

Koffka and especially Köhler further elaborated an idea suggested by Wertheimer in rgw article mentioned, that Gestalten were met with also at the physiological level. For the Gestalt theorists, it was important to be able to explain *why* two stationary flashing light points were the source of a perception of motion, if a scientific psychology was to be established. It was not sufficient to give a counterexample to the constancy hypothesis, without pointing to how research could be done without it.

Köhler developed the physiological side of the law of *Prägnanz* in terms of the tendency in physiological processes to strive for a maximal degree of stability; as Ernst Mach had noted, the equilibrium figures were distinguished by their symmetry and regularity since more energy was needed to destroy symmetry than to restore it.[68] Köhler claimed that this

regularity was fundamental, and that the tendency to simplest shape, to *Prägnanz*, characterises not only perception, but physical systems in general and thus reality as such.

Now, in contrast to Wertheimer, who claimed that we need other principles of thought in psychology than in mathematics and physics, Köhler wanted to show that physicists don't reason the way psychologists believe. At this point the earlier mentioned "Ehrenfels criteria" comes into the picture. First, a Gestalt is something more than a sum of its parts – this criterion is too weak, according to Köhler, since it only states that all tones need to occur in the same consciousness, but nothing about their influence upon one another. The second criterion is based on the idea of transposability: Gestalten have structural properties that may remain when the absolute constituents change. For Köhler, this criterion is too strong: it is a sufficient condition, but not as the former a necessary one. Yet, it points to a typical phenomenon, namely that a Gestalt is independent of the particular constituents.[69]

Furthermore, Köhler gives examples of physical systems that fulfil both criteria – stationary electric currents, the diffusion of a substance in a solution – and calls them strong Gestalten: the mutual dependency is so solid that it is impossible to speak of constituent parts at all; we rather have moments that co-operate, that "support" one another. Weak Gestalten, on the other hand, are not immediately dependent on the topography of the system.[70] In other words, there are various levels of Gestalten, strong, weak, summative groups, etc. The universe is not "one big gestalt," as Koffka writes; in fact, such a conception would preclude scientific activity altogether. [71] Next, Köhler develops his thesis of psychophysical isomorphism. Rather than a correspondence between psychic and physical atoms, as in the constancy hypothesis, the equivalence is structural: Gestalten in perception have as their counterpart physiological ones.

Yet, the transfer of the notion of *Prägnanz* to physics indicates a problem in Gestalt theory,[72] which Merleau-Ponty will take note of. We begin with a notion taken from the description of experience, where it depicts a privileged phenomenon: a good, pretty form. At this point, there is no assumption made about the objective world. Thereupon the notion is transferred to physical reality, where it gets another function. It will now be used to explain the perceptual process from a physiological point of view: *prägnant* is here the shape that has a high degree of equilibrium and stability.

But do we still speak of the same phenomenon? Can we without further ado compare a descriptive and rather aesthetic concept with an economic principle? As Merleau-Ponty observes, it seems that the theoretical prejudices have merely been reformulated in this way.[73] Abandoning the constancy hypothesis made it possible to question the very assumption of

two corresponding parallel levels. In describing the relation between psychology and physiology in terms of isomorphism, however, the Gestalt psychologists did not liberate themselves from the dualistic framework.

Behavioural Gestalten

The Gestaltists' experiments as well as the physiological and neurological research of for example Goldstein, showed that normal behaviour could not be understood in the behaviourist way, as a mosaic of conditional reflexes. Goldstein demonstrated that a stimulus does not act by the properties of its component parts but by its properties as a whole.[74] The same partial stimulus can give rise to different effects, depending on the constellation of which it is a constituent, and the effect of a complex stimulus is therefore often "not foreseeable on the basis of the elements which compose it."[75]

As Koffka had noted, the stimuli must be defined in terms of the relation between the world and the organism. The stimuli and the response form a circuit, Merleau-Ponty writes: the organism offers itself to actions from the outside, and thereby contributes to the form of the exitant.[76] For this reason, Merleau-Ponty insists that there is a *circular* rather than a linear causality between the organism and its environment: the excitation is already a response, and cannot be defined independently of the organism.[77] Furthermore, in Goldstein's studies conditional reflexes are revealed as the result of an *isolation*, due to injury, disease, or the laboratory situation.[78] Far from being the basic components of normal behaviour, the conditional reflexes appear to be pathological phenomena. The most fundamental aspects of an organism, its flexibility, its capacity to learn or to transform its behaviour in the case of injury, are impossible to account for in behaviourist terms.

Hence, the necessity of a qualitative distinction between different levels of behaviour, over and beyond the quantitative one between different stocks of action. Here the notion of Gestalt comes into the picture, as a descriptive category whose aim is to follow "the natural articulations of phenomena."[79] Whereas the categories of objective thought are imposed upon the facts, the structural categories, Merleau-Ponty writes, are capable of being "patterned on" ("*calquées sur*") the phenomena themselves.[80] Moreover, the distinction between levels of behaviour must concern *structure*, rather than being, as in Gestalt psychology, a division between orders of the same form.

The Orders of Behaviour

In *The Structure*, Merleau-Ponty classifies types of behaviour according to the degree of their attachment to a lived context. He distinguishes between *syncretic*, *amovable* and *symbolic behaviour*,[81] while pointing out that these forms correspond to different species of animals only as their most typical behaviour. *Syncretic behaviour* is above all found in invertebrates: the animal responds to specific complexes of stimuli or certain abstract features of the situation. A spider, for example, is incapable of distinguishing between the vibrations of a fly and those of a tuning-fork, since its behaviour is a reaction to particular vibrations and not to other aspects of the fly – if a dead fly is put into its net it will not treat it as bait. At this level, the animal is "imprisoned" in its natural conditions of life; the relations of structure involved are tied to the concrete situation and thus submerged in the material content.[82]

Only with *amovable* or *signal behaviour* do structures appear that are relatively independent of the concrete situation in which they are realised. The animals concerned, the vertebrates, can grasp relations and analogies, and are thereby capable of perceiving an event as indicating something else than itself: as a signal. An example is the chimpanzees in Köhler's famous experiments, one of whom put boxes on top of one another in order to grab the fruit that was suspended out of reach.[83] There is a limit, however, to the animal's capacity of adapting to the structure of the signal rather than to its material properties. The same chimpanzee who had learned to use boxes as tools for reaching suspended bananas, would not use the one that is offered him if another monkey is sitting on it. For the chimpanzee the "box-as-seat" and the "box-as-instrument" are two distinct objects, and not, as for the human, two aspects of one single thing.

If the animal cannot choose as he wishes a point of view of the object, neither can he put his own body in the place of the thing and look at himself as the goal. For example, the chimpanzees can well make a detour in order to find a fruit that has been thrown out of the window, but are incapable of making the fruit take a detour, if this is what is required for them to reach it.[84] In other words, the privilege of the animal's own body and the spatial organisation that this implies cannot be disturbed; the animal does not have the capacity to look at the object as an invariant in the same way as his own body is one, or inversely to treat his own body as an object. It lacks the ability to project a virtual or fictive situation, which makes *symbolic behaviour* possible – to detach the signal from the immediate, lived situation, thereby transforming it into a symbol.

In order for the animal to be capable of recognising a constant thing under the change of aspects, it would have to treat certain exteroceptive stimuli (the visual perception of a moving object) – and certain interoceptive or proprioceptive stimuli (the kinaesthetic experience of his own body taking the same trajectory) as representatives of each other. This is exactly what symbolic behaviour implies: the ability to "*have* an object *make* a detour," tracing with a gesture "the symbol of the movement which we would have to make if we were in its place."[85] Here the structures have emerged from the context to the exent that they are "transposable" from one sense modality to another; a structure of a second order is instituted, a relation between relations. The sign is liberated from the material situation and can become "the proper theme for an activity which tends to *express* it."[86] At this level, behaviour does not merely have a signification, it *is* signification.[87]

A Philosophy of Gestalt

Gestalt theory showed that behaviour regarded "geographically" [88] – the sum of movements executed in physical space – must be distinguished from behaviour in the proper sense of the term: those same movements viewed "in their internal articulation and as a kinetic melody endowed with a meaning."[89] Whereas the isolated parts of a structure – in this case the actual movements objectively considered – are elements of the physical world, the structural whole that it constitutes is not.[90] Behaviour is "neither thing nor consciousness, and this is what renders it opaque to intelligence [*l'intelligence*]."[91] It presents itself in perceptual experience, and can be adequately described through the notion of form or structure. In fact, this notion "saves us" from the antithesis between empiricism and intellectualism. But, Merleau-Ponty adds, "precisely for this reason the notion of form is ambiguous."[92]

The concept of Gestalt thus necessitates a transformation of our habits of thought. Notwithstanding, the Gestalt psychologists do not pursue this notion to its most important consequences, writes Merleau-Ponty.[93] Rather, the Gestalt is inserted in the realist ontology out of which the old antinomies between materialism and spiritualism arose: the higher orders of activity are still founded in the physical order. Instead of a parallelism between atomic stimuli and reactions, we have a parallelism between structures. In fact, Gestalt theory does not pose the ontological question radically enough, as to what sort of *being* pertains to form, but continues to view the world as the all-embracing totality of causally ordered events, in which behaviour is merely a "province."[94]

Moreover, if the relation between the organism and its environment is circular to some degree, in that the organism contributes to structuring the exitant rather than simply responding to it, then it seems difficult to claim that the Gestalts of the physical, physiological and behavioural levels are simply parallel. Merleau-Ponty contends that if one is thinking in terms of form, there has to be a *structural* difference between the physical, the vital (including syncretic and signal behaviour) and the human orders: otherwise there is no difference between them at all.[95]

The notion of Gestalt itself must be interrogated if nature and idea are to be united in a way that does not merely repeat the aporias of objective thinking and its substantialism[96] – but from what philosophical perspective? This question is not put explicitly in *The Structure*, although at the very end of this book Merleau-Ponty writes that it would have to imply a redefinition of transcendental philosophy; "in such a way as to integrate the very phenomenon of reality."[97] In his study from 1971 of Merleau-Ponty's early development, Theodore F. Geraets has shown that there is a fundamental hesitation in the French phenomenologist's first work: on the one hand the study is concerned with animal and human perceptual behaviour as its *object*, on the other the reseacher is engaged in it as perceptual *subject*: the point of view is perception as it is lived from the inside.[98] There is a shift of methodological standpoint here, not clearly acknowledged by the author: "Several times, the experience from the inside infiltrates into the thought of the external spectator," Gerates writes.[99] In *Phenomenology*, however, this hesitation is said to be overcome: here perceptual experience is described as it is lived from within.[100]

Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Gestalt

There is no obvious way to narrow down Merleau-Ponty's concept of Gestalt; partly because of the hesitation just mentioned, partly since he does not distinctly state how his notion differs from that of the psychologists. Generally speaking, Merleau-Ponty describes the Gestalt as a perceived togetherness ("*ensemble*") rather than a physical reality; it forms a joint dependence, to different degrees, between constituents – in contrast with the categories of objective thought where the objects are defined through the mutual exteriority of their parts.[101] For this reason, we have access to it as a perceptual consciousness, which is not transparent to itself but based on the precognitive structures anchored in the body.

Often, it is characterised much as Köhler's strong Gestalt, which as we remember was to be understood as the strongest of a range of Gestalten with various degrees of interdependence. One criterion is then transposability:[102]

> We will say that there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves.[103]

However, Merleau-Ponty's claim here that the Gestalt would be modified by "every change brought about in a single one of its parts" appears as an even stronger demand than Köhler's: certain tones of a melody may be modified in timbre or rhythm without the melody being transformed as such. On the other hand, the criterion of transposability does not seem to be a sufficient condition either, *pace* Köhler: an arbitrary series of tones may not appear to us as a melody, but it can still be transposed. In other words, it does not by itself single out what makes a series of tones into a unified whole, such as a melody, rather than a random series of notes.

If the Gestalt should be defined in terms of transposability, it must, I would claim, be in a looser sense of preservation of certain structural aspects while the elements are modified. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty often appeals to such an idea, in particular when discussing the corporeal schema as a basis of learning, understanding and expression: it is a "system of equivalences", an "immediately given invariant by which different motor tasks are instantly transposable."[104]

Besides, when Merleau-Ponty characterised the higher levels of behaviour on the basis of their relative structural independency of the material context, he also relied upon a notion of transposability: in the symbolic order of behaviour, structures are precisely transposable from one sense modality to the other, and can be considered second order structures. By contrast, the lower orders of behaviour are described in terms of integration: the degree to which the structure is "submerged [*noyée*]" in the material content or else emerges from it.[105]

Furthermore, in developing his criticism of Gestalt theory, Merleau-Ponty's notion seems more in line with that of Goldstein, for whom the Gestalt must be understood as a larger whole: the *organism*; what is considered as physical or psychical is then related to its function in this whole. The organic structure or Gestalt is described in terms of an equilibrium obtained, not with regard to "certain given external conditions," as for the physical form, but concerning "merely virtual conditions that the system itself brings to existence […]"[106]

Whereas the laws of *Prägnanz* for the Gestalt psychologists in the last resort were related to objective, physical conditions, Merleau-Ponty views the good Gestalt as determined in relation to the organism and its intrinsic striving to uphold a certain constancy and order. Relying upon Goldstein's studies, he maintains that certain behaviours – out of all those that would be possible from an analytical standpoint[107] – are *privileged* for the organism, and thus performed with a certain simplicity and naturalness.[108] Privileged behaviour is the most convenient and economical, "*with respect to the task in which the organism finds itself engaged*."[109]

The "good forms" determined by the Gestalt psychologists are an instance of this preference for certain perceptual behaviours, according to Goldstein. But this privilege is a function of "the total activity of the organism"[110] and for this reason not only an expression of the constants of a species, but always related to an individual norm.[111] Now, this emphasis on equilibrium should not lead us to assume that the organism mainly strives after order and continuity: this is indeed one basic tendency, but another is the tendency to novelty, the widening of its horizon.[112] The relation between the organism and its environment is characterised by a "fundamental biological law" that Goldstein calls *Auseinandersetzung*: a debate, confrontation or coping. In privileged behaviour, the organism can cope with the environing situation in a way that corresponds to its essence.[113]

All this points to the conception of a signifying unity that is neither an assembly of elements in the empiricist sense, nor the intellectualist's idea of the understanding, but a Gestalt, i.e., a "*structure*, […] the contingent arrangement by which materials begin to have meaning before us," that requires us to "recast the notion of consciousness."[114] In other words, at the primordial level of experience significations must have a thickness, as they are tied to the possibilities of action of a human organism and *lived* before they are *known*, as "significant wholes experienced in an indivisible manner as poles of action and nuclei of knowledge."[115]

This means that the mode of existence of the primitive objects of perception should be defined, rather than as objects of knowledge, Merleau-Ponty writes – ideal terms given in a multiplicity of perspectives – as lived *realities* that call for our action.[116] Consciousness must be perceptual, tied to action; Merleau-Ponty terms it a "network of significant [*significatives*] intentions which are sometimes clear to themselves and sometimes, on the contrary, lived rather than known".[117] In *Phenomenology*, he further characterises it as "a *non-thetic* consciousness [...] that does not possess the full determination of its objects".[118]

If the Gestalt fundamentally pertains to the individual organism who is related in a circular or dialectical way to its environment, it points to the idea of a *corporeal schema* mentioned earlier, that gives the body its "spatial and temporal, its inter-sensorial and sensorimotor unity."[119] This unity is dynamic: it incorporates new habits in itself, and even the instruments of those habits, and thus constitutes a "practical system" together with the external world.[120] Much as the organism was described in the earlier work, the body as Gestalt is here characterised as "polarized by its tasks," and this is why there can be before it "privileged figures against indifferent backgrounds."[121]

The Gestalt of Being

When the notion of Gestalt is discussed in Merleau-Ponty's later works, it is very much in similar terms as those outlined above. In the lecture notes from the Sorbonne, for example, he mentions as crucial contributions of Gestalt theory on the one hand an active notion of consciousness, on the other "the idea of *structuration*, i. e. an order that is not added to the materials but is immanent in them, and that is realised through their spontaneous organization."[122] He also emphasises the corporeal schema as what provides me with a system of equivalences and relates the position of my body to the environment as well as to others.[123]

The final working notes point to a decisive role for the notion of Gestalt in his phenomenological ontology, which was precisely an endeavour to rethink the relation between facticity and ideality or the visible and the invisible.[124] To a large extent, the statements on Gestalt resonate with the earlier descriptions: it is "a principle of distribution, the pivot of a system of equivalences," it has a generality in that it is transposable, it has or is a "heavy signification" and my body itself is a Gestalt in this sense: the system it makes up is organised about "a central hinge or a pivot."[125] At the same time, Merleau-Ponty contends that the Gestalt arises from the "polymorphism" of the flesh, and although consciousness is described in conformity with the earlier works as based on motor intentionality, the notion of Gestalt is said to situate philosophy beyond the distinction between subject and object.[126]

Moreover, the Gestalt is here characterised as "pregnancy", and Barbaras has rightly pointed out the importance in the final ontological project of this notion. Whereas in earlier texts, *prégnance* referred to the implicit presence of meaning in the world,[127] he here appeals to this term as a further argument against the Gestalt theorists, indicating its Latin connotations (more evident in the English language) that the psychologists did not grasp:

parturition, "power to burst open," fecundity.[128] In this sense, the mode of existence of Gestalt may well be described as "pregnancy," as Barbaras claims,[129] and it seems to play a similar role as the corporeal schema, as when Merleau-Ponty writes that pregnancy calls for an "*accurate* focusing," so that the good form can appear, and hence implies motility.[130] While the corporeal schema, however, in the earlier work marks the intimate tie between body-proper and world, pregnancy is in *The Visible and the Invisible* rather what makes it possible for this "enigmatic" relation to occur,[131] and thus for Being to appear to itself.

At the same time, the Gestalt is compared to "a diacritical system," an idea that makes its appearance already in the lecture notes from the 1950s.[132] On the face of it, the notion of linguistic meaning as determined solely by differences seems quite distinct from that of the Gestalt as a spontaneous organisation of elements.[133] If the meaning of those elements can only be determined in relation to the whole they are part of, they are not for that reason merely negatively defined: a tone that is part of a melody is not devoid of properties outside of that melody.[134]

What diacritical meaning has in common with Gestalt meaning seems to be that neither is positively determined in any straightforward way. They are not given before a thetic consciousness: whereas the sign has meaning in relation to language as a systematic whole, as re-enacted by a linguistic subject, the Gestalt only appears to a motor subject of perception. In the latter case, the system would be the network of actual and possible experiences constituted by the body-proper in connection with its world.[135] Merleau-Ponty himself draws attention to the disparity between diacritical meaning at the level of perception and of language: "there is all the same this difference between perception and language, that I *see* the perceived things and that the significations on the contrary are invisible."[136] For this reason, he introduces the notion of a "relative positivity" that characterises perception, and that we have to give a philosophical account of.

Conclusion

As should be clear from the above discussion, I do not agree that the notion of Gestalt and the consciousness perceiving it are merely negatively defined in Merleau-Ponty's first works: i.e., as "more than," "other than," "not reducible to" the sum of its elements. Rather, this notion is polysemic throughout his career: there is the general definition of a figure that detaches itself from its background, or that of a self-organisation of the perceptual field making an immanent signification appear. There is also the criterion of togetherness in one

and the same consciousness (Köhler's weak Gestalt) – which would indeed be a purely negative definition if it was taken alone – and that of transposability (Köhler's strong Gestalt), which itself can be interpreted in several ways: from the strongest of a total dependency of all its aspects, to the weaker and more plausible implying a preservation of certain structural features while the constituents are modified. Gestalt also appears as a structure of behaviour at different levels: the syncretic forms that are submerged in a concrete situation, the signal behaviour where they are more independent of the material context, and finally symbolic behaviour where structures are transposable between different senses and we hence can talk about a structure of structures.

As a higher order structure in this sense, the Gestalt is comparable to Goldstein's conception of the organism, or to Merleau-Ponty's own later notion of the corporeal schema. The good form or *Prägnanz* would then correspond to the equilibrium that an individual organism is striving for, with respect to the task it is engaged in. The organism and the environment are related to each other in a circular way, much as the bodily schema forms a practical system with the world.

Finally, there is the definition of structure in diacritical terms, both at the linguistic and the perceptual level. Though this idea is not completely worked out, it should clearly not be understood as a purely negatively determined meaning in the structuralist sense,[137] but as a relative positivity: the sensible world is a system of equivalences, upon which the world of significations rests.[138]

Merleau-Ponty learned from Gestalt theory that philosophy is not self-sufficient: it has its own prejudices, and sometimes it is an empirical science that drives it to a radical questioning of these preconceptions. Of course, science – experimental psychology in this case – does not *replace* philosophy,[139] but is in need of radical philosophical reflexion if it is to imply a "disruption" of the objectivist conceptions.[140]

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NOTES :

[1] I am indebted to an anonymous referee and to Staffan Carlshamre for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. In the following, I give references to existing translations of cited works, although they have sometimes been altered. Other translations are my own.

[2] Whereas Alphonse de Waelhens merely mentions Gestalt psychology and Goldstein in his book on Merleau-Ponty's first two works, *Une Philosophie de l'ambiguïté. L'Existentialisme de Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Leuven/Paris: Nauwelaerts, 1951/1978, G.B. Madison discusses Gestalt theory briefly when summarizing the basic ideas of *The Structure of Behavior* (*The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981, 2f.), while M.C. Dillon in fact consecrates a whole chapter on the "Ontological Implications of Gestalt Theory" (*Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988/1997). In Renaud Barbaras's major book on Merleau-Ponty's ontology, *De l'être du phénomène. Sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty*, Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1991 (*The Being of the Phenomenon*, trans. T. Toadvine and L. Lawlor, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), Gestalt theory is put forward in the introduction as the basis of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, but is not discussed further in the book (in the preface to the English translation, xxi, Barbaras regrets that he did not at the time deal with Merleau-Ponty's first work and his use of the notion of Gestalt), and the same goes for most French

speaking works until Étienne Bimbenet's study *Nature et Humanité. Le Problème anthropologique dans l'œuvre de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris: Vrin, 2004. In Stephen Priest's over-view of Merleau-Ponty's thought, *Merleau-Ponty*, London: Routledge, 1998, Gestalt psychology is mentioned twice, and Goldstein not at all, whereas Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, London: Routledge, 2008, allots a few pages to the issue, likewise do Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, *Merleau-Ponty and* Phenomenology of Perception, London: Routledge, 2011. More recently, Ted Toadvine devotes a chapter of his *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009, to an interpretation of nature "as Gestalt and Melody", 21f., on the basis of *The Structure of Behavior*.

[3] For example Jenny Slatman, *L'Expression au-delà de la représentation. Sur l'aisthêsis et l'esthétique chez Merleau-Ponty*, Leuven: Peeters/Paris: Vrin 2003, 128, Talia Welsh, "From Gestalt to Structure: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Early Analysis of the Human Sciences", *Theory & Psychology*, 16:4, 2006 (527-551), 529 or Toadvine, op.cit., 21-22, 138, n.9.

[4] In the sense of Husserl's maxim "zu den Sachen selbst": "*Merleau-Ponty et la psychologie de la forme*", *Les Études philosophiques*, 2, 2001 (151-163), 151.

[5] *La Structure du comportement*, Paris: P.U.F., 1942/1990 (*SC*) (trans. A.L. Fisher, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

[6] *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945 (*PP*) (trans. D.A. Landes. London: Routledge, 2012).

[7] With the exception of Robert Vallier, who examines the notion of Gestalt in relation to animality in Merleau-Ponty's courses on Nature, in "The Indiscernible Joining: Structure, Signification, and Animality in Merleau-Ponty's *La Nature*," *Chiasmi international*, 3, 2001 (187-212). However, in claiming that the Gestalt is for Merleau-Ponty "the idealized perception of relations" (192) and thus that "the things give or show themselves to us as signs" (194), Vallier transforms it to precisely an intellectualist notion, whereby it looses its critical power.

[8] Published in *Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne. Résumés de cours (1949-1952)*, ed. J. Prunair, Grenoble: Cynara, 1988 (*MPS*) (*Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, trans. T. Welsh, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010) and *Parcours. 1935-1951*, ed. Prunair, Lagrasse: Verdier 1997, *Parcours deux. 1951-1961*, ed. Prunair, Lagrasse: Verdier, 2000 (*P2*).

[9] *La Nature. Notes, Cours du Collège de France (1956–1960)*, ed. D. Séglard. Paris: Seuil, 1995 (*N*) (*Nature*, trans. R. Vallier, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), *L'Institution. Dans l'histoire personelle et publique/Le Problème de la passivité. Le Sommeil, l'Inconscient, la Mémoire. Notes de Cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)*, eds. D. Darmaillacq, C. Lefort and S. Ménasé, Paris: Belin, 2003 (*Institution and Passivity*, trans. Lawlor and H. Massey, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010) and *Le Monde sensible et le monde de l'expression. Cours au Collège de France, Notes, 1953*, eds. E. de Saint Aubert and S. Kristensen, Genève: MetisPresses, 2011 (*MSME*).

[10] *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, ed. Lefort, Paris: Gallimard, 1964 (*VI*) (trans. A. Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). This work is contemporary with some of the lectures on Nature (*N*) referenced in the former footnote.

[11] Barbaras, "*Merleau-Ponty*", 151-152.

[12] Ibid., 161, 157.

[13] Barbaras, *De l'être*, 62f./44. This is also the point of view of Bimbenet, 30.

[14] Barbaras, "Merleau-Ponty", 152, 160. (On "*prégnance*", see footnote 17 *infra*).

[15] Ibid., 162.

[16] On this point, I am more in agreement with Lester Embree, "Merleau-Ponty's Examination of Gestalt Psychology" (John Sallis, ed., *Merleau-Ponty, Perception, Structure,* Language, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1981), who states that there are no significant changes in Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Gestalt theory, 91.

[17] The standard translation into French of *Prägnanz* is *prégnance*, and this term as used by Merleau-Ponty is rendered in English as "pregnancy" by Lingis, translator of *VI*.

[18] See for example *MPS* 181/139.

[19] *PP* 165/42. Barbaras also contends that Merleau-Ponty "obviously distances himself" from Gestalt psychology, and that it is only in the working notes of the last years that "the Gestalt remakes its appearance," "Merleau-Ponty", 151. But as noted earlier, Merleau-Ponty deals repeatedly with Gestalt theory in his lectures and writings in the 50s.

[20] Mitchell Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890-1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995/1998, writes that these "elementistic and mechanistic assumptions about consciousness [were] shared explicitly or implicitly by all attempts to present psychology as a natural science in the nineteenth century," 60.

[21] Ash lists major erroneous interpretations of Gestalt theory as a neo-Kantian or Cartesian epistemology on 433.

[22] It should be noted that the standard translation "*forme*" in French is not unproblematic: as we shall see in the following, Gestalt theory is precisely critical of the conception of perception as constituted by matter that is *formed* in a certain way, either by mechanisms of association or by a superior intellectual function; for this reason, the Gestalt is the opposite of a pure form. In German it refers to a structured whole, often with the implication of a concrete entity (see Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology: An Introduction to New Concepts in Modern Psychology,* New York: Liveright, 1929/1947, 177). Cf. Paul Guillaume, *La Psychologie de la forme*, Paris: Flammarion, 1937/1979, 5, who proposes the terms "structure" or "organisation" as translation.

[23] Embree claims to find in Merleau-Ponty a terminological difference between the terms Gestalt/form and structure, in that the latter would "designate specifically how a gestalt is organized" (94). However, this is a quite occasional usage; for the most part "structure," "form," "organised whole," etc., are employed to complement each other (as in *SC* 88/79: "un phénomène *de structure ou de 'forme'*." My emphasis). One reason for this terminological variability is certainly that the notion of form is, as explained in the preceding note, highly ambiguous; another that the diverse expressions approach a complex and all-pervading phenomenon from different angles, much in the way the network of metaphors in his later philosophy are used to, in Slatman's words, "encircle a 'centre' of signification" (*L'Expression*, 212).

[24] Only in 1941, psychology became an independent discipline in Germany. Ash, 7.

[25] It was Köhler who coined this term, in "*Über unbemerkte Empfindungen und Urteilstäuschungen*", 1913 (trans. in *The Selected Papers of Wolfgang Köhler*, ed. M. Henle, New York: Liveright, 1971).

[26] *Die Lehre von den Tonempfindungen als physiologische Grundlage für die Theorie der Musik*, Braunschweig: Friedrich Vieweg & Sohn, 1862/1877, 245.

[27] Husserl did not fully liberate himself from this dualism either; see Barry Smith, "Gestalt Theory: An Essay in Philosophy" (in Smith, ed., *Foundations of Gestalt Theory*, Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 1988), 18f.

[28] We see "the things and not the holes between them", was the formulation of Wertheimer's friend and collaborator Erich von Hornbostel; see Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology,* New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1935/1963, 208.

[29] The philosopher Hermann Lotze postulated what he called "*Localzeichen*" in the retina that should give rise to the experience of depth, *Medicinische Psychologie, oder Physiologie der Seele*, Leipzig: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1852, 331f. See also Ash, 53f.

[30] The hypothesis on "*unbemerkte Empfindungen*" was formulated by Helmholtz, but defended also by Stumpf, see Köhler, "Über unbemerkte".

[31] Gurwitsch, *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966, 20, cf. 31.

[32] Ash, 67.

[33] *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie*, 14:3, 1890 (249-292) (trans. in Smith, *Foundations*). According to Ash, 88, this article was "the founding document of Gestalt theory."

[34] In fact, von Ehrenfels – the "father" of Gestalt theory – was, as well as several of the younger gestalt psychologists, a devoted musician. See Smith, "Gestalt Theory", 11-12, and Ash, 89, 103f.

[35] Ehrenfels, 251f./84f.

[36] Köhler, *Die Physischen Gestalten im Ruhe und im stationären Zustand: Eine naturphilosophische Untersuchung*. Braunschweig: Friedrich Vieweg & Son/Erlangen: Philosophische Akademie, 1920/1924, 35f.

[37] Ibid. 37.

[38] Ehrenfels, 258/90.

[39] A common method of learning to remember particular intervals, in order to, for instance, facilitate singing *a prima vista*, is to exemplify the intervals with the introductory tones of known melodies. Ehrenfels mentions this phenomenon on 260-261/91-92.

[40] Guillaume, 17. Emphasis in text.

[41] Ehrenfels, 262-263/93.

[42] Such as bodily expressions, emotions, artistic and literary appearances. Ehrenfels, 268f./97f. Cf. Smith, "Gestalt Theory," 15.

[43] *Gestalt Psychology and the Cognitive Revolution*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995, 16.

[44] *Synsoplevede figurer: Studier i psykologisk analyse*, Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1915.

[45] Wertheimer, *Über Gestalttheorie*, Erlangen: Philosophische Akademie, 1925, 47 (trans. in W.D. Ellis, *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1938, 5).

[46] Reprinted in *Drei Abhandlungen zur Gestalttheorie* (1925), Erlangen: Philosophische Akademie/Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967. This was, according to Murray, "the first major paper of the Gestalt movement," 11. Cf. Ash, 125.

[47] Between 200 and 30 milliseconds. At an interval beyond 200 ms one sees two successive flashes, at below 30 ms one sees the two lights flashing at the same time, at different spots. Wertheimer, 18f.

[48] The experiment is described by Wertheimer on 8f. and 102-103.

[49] Ibid., 14.

[50] Slightly below 60 ms.

[51] See Wertheimer, 62f.

[52] Ibid., 8. I have discussed this issue in my ”När illusionen gäckar filosofin: Merleau-Ponty och gestaltteorin,” *Divan*, 1-2, 2008 (27-32).

[53] Wertheimer, 31.

[54] Ibid., 62f., 67.

[55] Ibid., 69.

[56] *PP* 312/282.

[57] In Smith's words, "Bibliography", in Smith, *Foundations*, 347.

[58] Köhler, "Über unbermerkte", 34.

[59] Köhler, "Über unbermerkte", 36. Cf. Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology*, 75f.

[60] At the congress of the Society for Experimental Psychology in Göttingen. See Ash, 133.

[61] This latter step was undertaken by Köhler. See Murray, 31.

[62] In German, "*Prägnanz*" mainly connotes conciseness.

[63] Wertheimer, "Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt", II, *Psychologische Forschung*, 4, 1923 (301-350), 318.

[64] Ibid., 333, 308f. Cf. also Koffka, *Principles*, 164f.

[65] Gurwitsch, 29.

[66] Köhler's experiments on Tenerife between 1913 and 1915, with apes and chimpanzees but also chickens, showed that animals do not apprehend absolute qualities either. In fact, it seems that only (adult) humans and anthropoids have the capacity to perceive absolute qualities, through the analytical attitude (see e.g. *PP* 19, 23f./12, 16f.; *MPS* 190/147). These experiments are discussed at length by Merleau-Ponty in *SC* (see *infra*).

[67] Koffka, "Beiträge zur Psychologie der Gestalt, III. Zur Grundlegung der Wahrnehmungspsychologie", *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 73, 1915 (11-90), 33-34. For a clarifying discussion, see Smith, "Gestalt Theory," 39f. Cf. also Koffka, *Principles*, 148f.

[68] Mach, *Die Mechanik in ihrer Entwickelung, historisch-kritisch dargestellt*, Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1883, 371. Cf. Ash, 184-185.

[69] Köhler, *Die Physischen*, 35-37.

[70] Ibid., 114f., 126f.

[71] Koffka, *Principles*, 22; Köhler, op.cit. 156.

[72] This transfer makes it "the most prominent and most contested legacy of Gestalt theory," in the words of Gaetano Kanizsa, *Vedere e pensare*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991, 101.

[73] *SC* 102/92.

[74] Goldstein discusses these results in *Der Aufbau des Organismus: Einführung in die Biologie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Erfahrungen am kranken Menschen*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1934, chapter II.

[75] *SC* 9/10.

[76] *SC* 15/16f., 11/13.

[77] *SC* 31/31.

[78] Goldstein, 106.

[79] *SC* 45/43.

[80] *SC* 63/59.

[81] This is, according to Embree, "Merleau-Ponty's central contribution to Gestaltist thought," op.cit. 102.

[82] *SC* 107/97, 114/104.

[83] Köhler, *Intelligenzprüfungen an Menschenaffen: Mit einem Anhang zur Psychologie des Schimpansen* (1917/1921), Berlin: Springer, 1973, 96f.

[84] *SC* 127/117. In more detail, the chimpanzees "are presented with the task of obtaining a piece of fruit separated from them by the vertical sides of a box and […] must push the food away from them toward the open edge of the box in order to succeed."

[85] *SC* 128/118. Emphasis in text.

[86] *SC* 131/120. Emphasis in text.

[87] *SC* 133/122.

[88] Koffka, *Principles*, 27f.

[89] *SC* 140/130.

[90] *SC* 139/129: "Grey G 1 and grey G 2 are part of nature, but not the 'pair' of colours constituted by the organism in their regard and which it 'recognizes' in another ensemble in which the absolute colours are different."

[91] *SC* 138/127.

[92] Ibid.

[93] *SC* 147/136; *PP* 58/48.

[94] *SC* 144/134.

[95] *SC* 143,146/132-133, 136.

[96] *SC* 147/137.

[97] *SC* 241/224.

[98] *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendentale. La Genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu'à la* Phénoménologie de la perception. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, 39.

[99] Ibid., 66.

[100] Ibid., 184. The difference between the two works is described in similar terms by Merleau-Ponty himself in "Titres et travaux. Projet d'enseignement (1951)", *P2* 13.

[101] *SC* 155/143, 8/9.

[102] Toadvine even sees the transposability criterion as defining Gestalt: "Like a melody, the structure of a gestalt is transposable, iterable." Op.cit., 23. Cf. also 26, 31.

[103] *SC* 50/47.

[104] *PP* 165/142.

[105] *SC* 128/118, 113/103.

[106] *SC* 157/145.

[107] Or what Goldstein calls "isolierende Betrachtung," i.e., that which considers the organism as composed of elements. Goldstein, 44–45, 220f.

[108] Ibid., 224: "das *Erlebnis der größten 'Bequemlichkeit'*, *'Natürlichkeit'* und die *größte Exaktheit der Leistung*" (emphasis in text).

[109] *SC* 147/159. Emphasis in text.

[110] *SC* 160/147.

[111] Goldstein maintains that there are two groups of constants, first those that express the essence of the species, second the constants that express the essence of the individual organism, op.cit., 238.

[112] The result of these two tendencies is cultural creation ("*die Schöpfungen der Kultur*"), writes Goldstein, 196.

[113] Ibid., 76, 235.

[114] *SC* 223/206-207, 183/169. Emphasis in text.

[115] *SC* 179/166.

[116] *SC* 182/168; 183/169.

[117] *SC* 187/173.

[118] *PP* 61/50. Emphasis in text.

[119] *PP* 115/102.

[120] *PP* 119/105.

[121] *PP* 117/103.

[122] *MPS* 181/139, 195/150. Emphasis in text.

[123] For example *MPS* 311/247.

[124] The degree to which the last manuscripts bear witness to a radical alteration of Merleau-Ponty's thought cannot be assessed here, although I believe that a detailed reading from the point of view of Gestalt would shed considerable light on this issue.

[125] *VI* 258/205, 259/205.

[126] *VI* 260/207.

[127] E.g. *PP* 490/453 or *P2* 20.

[128] *VI* 155, 262/115, 208.

[129] Barbaras, "Merleau-Ponty", 160.

[130] *VI* 262/209. Emphasis in text.

[131] Cf. *L'Œil et l'esprit*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, 18; "Eye and Mind," trans. M. Smith, in G.A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting,* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993, 124, "The enigma stems from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen."

[132] For example in *MSME* 174, Merleau-Ponty writes: "Le schéma corporel comme système diacritique", or in *MPS* 78/60, where he clarifies the diacritical concept of signification in comparing language to a Gestalt.

[133] Cf. *MPS* 499/401.

[134] In Toadvine's interpretation, the Gestalt is diacritical at the outset for Merleau-Ponty, but this is clearly a result of a conflation of perceived structures with differential relations (op.cit., 33, 42).

[135] Cf. *MSME* 180; *MPS* 542-3/437.

[136] *VI* 214/267. Emphasis in text. Cf. also *MSME* 203: "il reste à différencier le signe diacritique du niveau 'naturel' et du niveau 'culturel'".

[137] For a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of diacriticity in relation to the structuralist conception, see my "Merleau-Ponty's Encounter with Saussure's Linguistics: Misreading, Reinterpretation or Prolongation?", *Chiasmi international*, 15, 2013 (123-142).

[138] Cf. *VI* 301/247.

[139] This issue is discussed in Merleau-Ponty's course at the Sorbonne 1950-52 on "Human Sciences and Phenomenology," published in two versions in *P2* and in *MPS*.

[140] Cf. *N* 344-5/277.