

Merleau-Ponty's Invisible Man

She seems to hide all looks that have ever fallen
into her, so that, like an audience,
she can look them over, menacing and sullen,
and curl to sleep with them. But all at once

as if awakened, she turns her face to yours;
and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny,
inside the golden amber of her eyeballs
suspended, like a prehistoric fly.

Taken from "Black Cat" by Rainer Maria Rilke

In his late works, Merleau-Ponty tells us that there is something invisible within the heart of the visible.¹ There has been very little in the way of a direct attempt to expose this invisibility to the light of analysis in secondary literature. Perhaps this is inevitable; perhaps there is a logic at work whereby the invisible perdures within each attempt to represent it in writing. As with light itself, perhaps visibility can never preclude its obverse, that of obscurity, occlusion and a 'dialectic of illusion.'² Here, I shall nonetheless try to expose Merleau-Ponty's concept of invisibility, and dwell on its bearing within the visual fabric of society as it is disrupted through a key moment in twentieth century literature.

Invisibilities

Merleau-Ponty's conception of the invisible is intimately entwined within his 'flesh' ontology. This does not mean that we thereby dismiss his earlier work as irrelevant in this regard. In fact the contrary must be the case. Only by situating the 'invisible of the flesh' within a long-standing dialogue with Kant will we begin to understand it.

In this way, the invisible of the flesh is seen as the *necessary* outcome of a folding back of Kant's notion of the transcendental into the world itself.

¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1969)

² I am reminded of Maurice Blanchot's incomparable words, "Light's deception, then, would be in the fact that it slips away in a radiating absence, infinitely more obscure than any obscurity, since the absence proper to light is the very act of its light, its clarity, and since the work of light is accomplished only when light makes us forget that something like light is at work.." *The Infinite Conversation* (1998) p163. Blanchot is quick to point out the dangers of ignorance about this essential deception of light, "[b]ut the most serious problem ... remains the duplicity by which light causes us to have confidence in the simplicity of the act of seeing, proposing im-mediation to us as the model of knowledge whereas light itself, out of sight and in a hidden manner, acts only as a mediator, playing with us through a dialectic of illusion."(Ibid.)

With Merleau-Ponty, the conditions of possibility for experience are not derived from an originary set of abstract and universal categories, rather, they are embedded within the existential complex. This marks a radical revision of the Kantian project; the production of experience is now grounded in a pre-existent matrix of body-world relations of which knowledge and cognitivity are after-effects, disrupted collectively or individually in its terms. The visualist language of reflection and of a theoretical consciousness drop out, in favor of a more shadowy metaphoric. Rather than an ontogenesis of the "I think" determining itself through the deployment of a schematic process, the world and its subjects emerge from out of each other through what the chaos theorists would call 'autopoiesis.'³ The question generally begged by epistemology - how subjectivity itself appears - is therefore directly addressed.

The transcendental is not thereby reduced into an incarnate intentionality to be eventually dissipated by *la chaire* (from "I think" to "I can" to "the flesh"). This popular reading is displaced by understanding that for Merleau-Ponty, the conditions of possibility for experience are *existential*. This re-situation has two implications.

First of all, the transcendental field becomes *dynamic*; it is receptive to the folds and ruptures of existential events. 'To see is to be seen' and 'to touch is to be touched' become slogans denoting a horizon of possibility that itself may be inflected by transformations in the world. Speech acts, films, poetry, riots, theory, paradigm shifts in science - all tend to conceal their own potential to change or inflect the rules themselves. The production of sense is, through the flesh ontology, an operation that is enveloped by the invisible movement of the world itself. The world, and not a set of de-contextualized logico-cognitive operations, enacts the genesis of meaning. Prior to any propositional judgement that I may make, assuming concepts of subject, 'I', object or noema, indeed prior to any schematic addition of temporality within Kant's transcendental framework, the world infiltrates my perception, establishing a 'communication more ancient than thought' between body and world.⁴

To articulate this incarnate verbleness, beyond using other tropes and other words, a different mode of grammatical voice is needed, other than an

³ See Glen Mazis' interesting intertwining of the flesh ontology and chaos theory, "Chaos Theory and Merleau-Ponty's Ontology" in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World* (1999) edited by Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley.

⁴ *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), p254.

active-passive polar opposition.⁵ When I glance at the curtain in front of me, its folds and materiality seem to *seep into my being* prior to any quasi-solipsistic act of a constitutive consciousness. It lies before me as a sort of beguiling expectancy, as with the city outside obliquely shaping the form of my experience across the days and weeks that I live here. The world or place is always in excess of my cognitive acts, retaining a patterning that goes beyond any intentional judgment or act.⁶ And yet, the world as representation *is* only as it is through the effects the actions myself and others have upon it. In this case, there is an uncertainty concerning all events and actions: we cannot tell whether our agency is changing the world or whether in fact the world is determining the form and content of our actions.⁷ Thus, Merleau-Ponty's dynamizing of the transcendental field by making it turn upon the envelope of existence leads to a further consideration – that the relations between agent and existential field are *fundamentally ambiguous*. The direction of determinism, it seems, can go either way (or perhaps both at once), and our destiny is bound to an essential unclarity.

This 'middle-voice' of the production of sense ramifies itself further. Against the grain of western metaphysics, vision is finally understood to involve a necessary alterity; that of the differential gestalt of other possible locations for perception beyond my own. My visual field is therefore in part an *occlusion* of other visual fields, a visibility achieved by way of a horizon that is for the most part hidden. Reversibility, or the possibility of being elsewhere, is therefore a possibility *virtual* to each experience: the finitude of even an ek-static conception of embodiment entails that it cannot be achieved in fact. Thus we understand why for Merleau-Ponty *inhabiting* space is the same as being *haunted* by it.⁸

Secondly, in Merleau-Ponty's flesh ontology, the conditions of possibility for experience are now *contingent* and grounded in events, rather than *necessary* and thereby universal. That slippery Kantian concern, the 'transcendental object', understood as the cognitive frame for any possible future experience, loses its projective scope as it is distributed within the differential paradigms of the place, the day or the culture at that moment

⁵ See John Llewelyn's *The Middle-Voice of Ecological Conscience* (1991).

⁶ The modern city is replete with strategies that exploit this pre-cognitive horizon of experience. Only when returning to London from a non-western city do these subliminal rouses become tangible.

⁷ This explains the tendency of expressive events to conceal their own potential for transformation of the existential field mentioned above.

⁸ See Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text"p5, 'Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space.' in *The Primacy of Perception* (1964).

within its unfolding. Contingency becomes the engine of difference. The transcendental object now determines the limits of any form of experience in respect of the Other; it becomes the site of fundamental contestation as different epistemic paradigms and forms of representation confront each other. Against Kant's careful separation, the transcendental once again gets intertwined with transcendence. As we shall see, thanks to the contemporary theoretical exigency to think difference, this contingency, applied to any form or representation of embodied experience, threatens to shatter the last reserve of philosophically induced stasis. 'Being', the 'univocal' or the 'one' are all taken beyond their limits as fundamentally divergent representations of the world are produced by agents situated within different existential contexts. A universal community, as the principle of any social field or as the ground of a phenomenological ontology, is denied according to the agonisms at work in the present. The last conceptual and ethical reserve of Kantianism – community as the universal – faces its own fracture. A different order of community will therefore have to be theorized.⁹

Merleau-Ponty's protracted dialogue with Kant begins therefore to reveal that the key issue is the question of transgressing the limits of a *visual* model of knowledge and communication. For the French philosopher, the invisible is not simply the negative form of space or the static silhouette of any perception. Moreover, it is not a shadow cast across the principle of co-existence. Rather, the invisible is the product of both an ambiguous pre-cognitive and apperceptual communication between the body and its world-horizon and a world forever replete with occluded 'other' spaces.¹⁰ Beneath recognition and cognitive judgment, another layer of pre-reflective communication is exposed.¹¹ The emphasis in his work is placed upon the body's creative capacity to adapt and transform itself within a given existential situation. Posture, gesture, speech, health, ritual, tradition: in each case a socio-cultural horizon or 'way of doing things' is, on Merleau-Ponty's account, less a fixed set of rules or a forms of knowledge, and more a set of resources that can be reworked pre-reflectively in response to the demands of the present. In this way, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes himself by providing a thoroughly *corporeal* theory of 'the event' as the active creative element at work in habit. Before the conscious mind awakes, the body

⁹ Henceforth by alternative means we can clarify the difference and deferral that motivates Derrida's non-concept of *differance*, where 'Being' is put under erasure, leading later on in his essay "The Force of Law" to a characterization of *differance* as justice.

¹⁰ In many ways, Merleau-Ponty here can be seen as returning "apperception" to its origins in Leibniz's thought, as against its variant in Kant.

¹¹ In his earlier, more Kantian phase, Merleau-Ponty referred to this layer in the language of the 'tacit'.

‘perpetually contributes’ to its mode of being-in-the-world, giving rise to a re-birth in the present of all that has been given as the form of its habitus.

This schema re-directs the relations between an existential theory of embodiment, freedom and the process of history away from the language of reflective judgment. The agent is free, on this account, to the extent that her socio-cultural horizon or habitus no longer functions as authoritative or originary. Each re-working or differential repetition of patterns of existence necessitates a de-centering or displacement of linear temporality and efficient causality. For the ‘free’ agent, belonging within a specific cultural history or tradition does not entail a deterministic program, implying a specific originary moment and subsequent acts of faithful reproduction. Unlike Heidegger and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty’s thought never results in a program of *Eigentlich* comportment. Rather, and in keeping with a Husserlian directive, creative, transformative somatic acts involve a bracketing or *suspension* of tradition as the prelude to its re-working, rupturing any linear expectancy by displacing the ‘originary moment’ from a point-zero to being a perpetually reconstituted effect of the present event.

It is important to be clear how this suspension works. The body’s historical situation is to be understood as a *cognitive frame*, a set of epistemic givens represented and reproduced at large. Although an effect of our apperceptual experience, knowledge can easily become its frame, solidifying the world in just the same way as the Kantian transcendental. In Merleau-Ponty’s thought, it is only through a pre-cognitive ontology of fleshy communication that this representational episteme can be disturbed. Prior to representation and visibility (the *re-cognition* of truth), the apperceptual body engages with its existential horizons in an ongoing ontogenesis. Through somatic relays and responses, the world changes before one knows that it has changed. The body *writes* difference into the present, as the form of its expression:

Given a perpetually new natural and historical situation to control, the perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth; at each instant it is something new. Every incarnate subject is like an open notebook in which we do not yet know what will be written [...] The very productivity or freedom of human life, far from denying our situation, utilizes it and turns it into a means of expression.¹²

For Merleau-Ponty, the other side of vision is at the same time the obverse of cognition, the tain of the mirror, the hidden mystery behind the cat’s eyes in Rilke’s poem. Prior to the reflective function of recognition, and the visual logic that develops from Kant into the combat of the eyes in Hegel’s

¹² "An Unpublished Text" p6.

master-slave dialectic, a different understanding of historical action opens up – and turns directly upon invisibility and non-recognition. The body becomes a *palimpsest*, a surface that can inscribe or be re-inscribed, as history becomes a discourse shrouded in ambiguity and obscurity.¹³

Ellison's Cave

When put alongside Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, Merleau-Ponty's account of invisibility appears problematic, to say the least. Although the French philosopher embeds alterity and difference within the structure of experience as we have seen, there remains a blindness in his thought as to how this shadowy sensibility itself gets inscribed within the social field. The opening lines of the novel alone show how invisibility is social at least as much as it is metaphysical:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

Ellison's novel has an elliptical narrative topology: the novel's prologue and epilogue interweave as soliloquies set within the same moment in time. *Invisible Man* begins and ends with the narrator, nameless and underground, living in secret in the basement of a whites-only building on the edge of Harlem. His abode is a blaze of light bulbs, courtesy of an unofficial arrangement with the wryly named Monopolated Light & Power. The story he tells is a picaresque of existential ennui, charting the tragi-comedies of failure at school, in a factory, in 'radical' politics and finally, Harlem. Ellison's speakerly and filmic voice sets out a series of scenes where one misadventure slips into another, against the shifting backdrop of brothels, passing voices, catchphrases, neon signs, authority and social unrest.

On one reading of the novel, the invisibility of the main character is thoroughly at odds with the notion of invisibility in Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, as has just been suggested. To begin, I shall explore this line of argument as a way of emphasizing the impact social constructions of embodied difference can have upon metaphysical

¹³ Merleau-Ponty thus challenges the view put forward by Foucault that the body is written on and destroyed by history. He writes in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", "[Genealogy's] task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body.' *The Foucault Reader* (1991) p83

frameworks. It is at this point that a different reading of the novel will emerge that both extends and complexifies the remit of existential phenomenology, showing at the same time its significance as a philosophical resource for understanding race.

The opening pages of the Prologue continue with the theme of invisibility. Invisibility, the Invisible Man explains, occurs as a 'construction of the inner eyes' of those who refuse to see him. The Invisible Man is invisible because he is not *recognised* as a human being. The citation above shows that through unconscious metonymic reduction, the "people" that refuse to see the Invisible Man through inner-eye constructions are in fact *white* people. Invisible Man therefore capitulates to and internalizes his enforced sub-human status by reproducing this ellipsis in his speech: all 'people' are *white* people. Moreover, his subterranean existence confirms this self-inflicted denial symbolically – living below ground one *remains* invisible, the street above being the level where recognition starts. The Invisible Man is, in effect, a 'sub-person' living in the "moral/political basement."¹⁴

As an anonymous and therefore generalizable figure, the Invisible Man's narrative reveals the visual status of black people in a white society that refuses to recognise them as human. Racism against black people deprives Merleau-Ponty's maxim about "seeing and being seen" of any last vestiges of innocence it may otherwise have had. The second part of the phrase becomes highly loaded, opening up the strange logic of a prejudice based on visibility. Being seen as black in a society that only recognizes whites as human means being seen as *invisible*. The anonymity of the Invisible Man is therefore 'perverse' in form; it is only through being highly visible in terms of racial markers that invisibility is achieved.¹⁵

Far from a human community whose freedom is guaranteed by pre-reflexive agency, Ellison's novel depicts a world cleft in two: a world of white humans and black sub-humans. As with Frantz Fanon's critique of Merleau-Ponty in *Black Skin White Masks* (1986), Ellison's novel can be used to characterize the freedom of the flesh espoused by existential phenomenology as a false-universal. Black people live in the west under a state of affliction, whereby a corporeal schema is undercut by an *epidermal schema* whose

¹⁴ Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (1998), p107.

¹⁵ See Lewis Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility" in *Existence in Black* (1995), edited by Lewis Gordon. He writes, "The logic of anonymity is, however, perverted in an antiblack world. If a black is overdetermined, then to see that black is to see every black." p75.

name is white supremacy.¹⁶ It is in these terms that invisibility, rather than referring to the expressive writing of the body's 'open notebook', denotes the primal scene of structural mis-recognition - the denial of black people as human beings.

This reading of Ellison's novel is highly consonant with Charles W. Mills' book, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (1998). Evidently strongly influenced by Ellison, Mills begins his text by defining black subjectivity in the west as a form of 'sub-personhood.'¹⁷ Mills shows that it is necessary for the reproduction of this two-tier social structure that its normative rationale is concealed:

White experience is embedded as normative, and the embedding is so deep that its normativity is not even identified as such. For this would imply that there was some other way that things could be, whereas it is obvious that this is just the way things are. A relationship to the world that is founded on racial privilege becomes simply *the* relationship to the world.¹⁸

The social frame of white normativity is naturalized, thereby hiding from view the various mechanisms by which persons are reduced to sub-persons on the basis of an epidermal schema. For Mills, this process problematizes the very basis of modern western political theory. The Locke-Kant-Rawls axis is rendered illegitimate in the context of an ongoing history of apartheid. Liberalism, in its different guises, assumes a rational individual acting in conditions of equality. Whether it is a social contract, universalizability or the 'original position', in each case liberal thought reveals its complicity with white supremacy through its failure to even recognize it. For Mills, the quest for justice must begin with the acknowledgment of the actual procedures of injustice, otherwise political theory unwittingly narrows its constituency. In the context of generalized racial injustice, modern liberal political theory conceals its own form of metonymical reduction.

In terms of remedy, Mills contends that "first-world" theory, whether liberal or Marxist in persuasion, cannot simply be augmented with what he calls 'racial endnotes'. For Mills, white supremacy is analogous to patriarchy - a global system of oppression that requires a semi-autonomous platform of critical engagement. Moreover, Mills argues convincingly in favour of particular terms of reference. Racism, whether 'anti-black' or otherwise,

¹⁶ See my essay "Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology" in *Race*, edited by Robert Bernasconi (forthcoming).

¹⁷ Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, p6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p10.

suffers from nebulosity and a psychologistic tendency: it can be individuated and thereby used to legitimate the suppression of a generalizable analysis. In contrast, 'white supremacy' points inalienably to a global structural-existential dynamic that pre-exists any localized or individuated phenomena: an anonymous virulence at large in the socius. White supremacy thus provides a broader context for understanding individual intentions:

...racial membership privileges or disadvantages individuals *independently* of the particular ideas they happen to have. (In that qualified sense, race is objective. Even so-called white renegades need to acknowledge that, no matter what their racial politics, they are privileged by their social classification.)¹⁹

The question that must be put in light of Mills' work is this: if neither liberalism nor Marxism, what methods and structures of thought can be used in order to advance a race theory gathered around the concept of white supremacy? Does the facticity of white supremacy invalidate *all* tools of engagement developed in western philosophy? It would seem that Mills' argument is too effective: in demonstrating the ongoing structural force of white supremacy, we are left no resources with which to contest it.

At this juncture, we should look again at the opening lines of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Although the experiences the narrator recounts are of his previous invisibility above ground, his *current* invisibility is more the effect of living in a basement. The narrator therefore actively avoids the perverse logic of 'being seen as invisible' referred to above. Furthermore, the Invisible Man does not appear to be suffering; he has learnt how to pilfer electricity from the local supplier. His dormitory is by no means a damp and unforgiving cave. Although marginalized from the visible world, the Invisible Man is certainly not incapacitated by his condition; after all, it affords him the energy and opportunity to articulate a long and complex tale.

It is in these terms that a different reading of Ellison's novel opens, suggesting a way out of the theoretical impasse outlined in Mills. Invisibility is no longer taken to signify *affliction*, rather, it becomes a *strategy* and a *praxis*. The other reading of *Invisible Man* is therefore that the journey of the novel begins and ends with the most effective way of existing within a two-tier white supremacist society. Rather than confront head-on the mechanisms of racial injustice, the Prologue and Epilogue outline an alternative strategy for survival than the serial failures in the world of recognition. Invisibility, as the avoidance of *being seen*, allows the

¹⁹ Ibid. p105.

Invisible Man to reconstruct himself as human, with potentiality and a future.

This reading can be generalized as a mode of effective praxis. Instead of facing continual self-negation, invisibility grants the victims of white supremacy a platform for autonomous agency. It is at this point that Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology becomes relevant once again. Anonymity and invisibility are now actively willed as principles that foster agency. This program is explicitly recognized by Fanon. In his essay "The Lived Experience of the Black", in the midst of an overburdened visibility, he "strives for anonymity, for invisibility."²⁰ Against the existential pain of white normativity, Fanon makes the plea that he would "accept the lot, as long as no-one notices."²¹ Here, invisibility is the condition that *allows for* agency, rather than being the framework for its restriction. As Vivian Sobchack suggests,

The invisible thus provides the grounds for the visible and is not only a condition but also a context for the act of seeing.²²

Sobchack's conjoining of condition with context here underlines exactly the move the Invisible Man makes, namely, to turn invisibility into a context, in this case a home. Invisibility becomes therefore the condition and context for agency in situations of oppression. We can begin to counter a purely negative reading of invisible contexts with one that stresses the *autonomy* that invisibility affords. Historico-cultural phenomena such as segregation, apartheid, and marginalized sub-cultural scenes can be re-read as producing contexts of invisibility which nurture agency. We can begin to understand why the Nation of Islam in the early 1960s was in secret talks with the Ku Klux Klan;²³ the positive perspective of segregation at work in the African American writer bell hooks's texts;²⁴ the power of invisibility as a tool of resistance in various African contexts as outlined by David Hechte and Maliqalim Simone's book *Invisible Governance: the Art of African Micropolitics* (1994). Of course, one of the earliest formulations of the power of contextual invisibility was Fanon's essay "Algeria Unveiled" in *A Dying Colonialism* (1965). Here, Fanon produces a multiple reading of the Islamic veil – as a site for both colonial fantasies *and* as revolutionary

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (1986), p116.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Vivian Sobcheck, *The Address of the Eye: a Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992), p85.

²³ See Mike Marqusee's recent book, *Redemption Song – Muhammed Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (2000), p60.

²⁴ See for example bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance" in *Yearning* (1991).

camouflage, as a signifier for tradition and as an entrenched symbol of Algerian culture and resistance. He writes,

It is the white man who creates the Negro. But it is the Negro who creates negritude. To the colonialist offensive against the veil, the colonized opposes the cult of the veil.²⁵

When put side-by-side with the first interpretation, this second reading of the power of invisibility in Ellison and elsewhere necessarily produces ambivalence. On the one hand, white supremacy constructs the black other as sub-human. To this extent, it should be resisted with a critical theory suited to the task as Mills proposes. On the other hand, the invisible spaces produced *within* a society structured historically by white supremacy themselves allow for and have produced modes of resistance and autonomy which should not be overlooked, if the question of agency and expression is to be taken seriously. In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator is fully aware of this tension:

And I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.²⁶

I suggest that the ambivalence of this *double reading* of white supremacy and its effects must be maintained, if both the force of its capacity for destruction and the counter-force of active resistance and resilient autonomy are to be acknowledged. It is along this path that Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of the relation between visibility and invisibility can be of use in the project of understanding and contesting the structures of race prejudice. The first reading of *Invisible Man* reminds those who may pursue this path that socially imposed modes of embodied difference cannot be ignored in any philosophically motivated attempt at an engaged and critical concrete analysis of our times. In ontological terms, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment must be supplemented with an increased emphasis on the *socially differentiated* character of being. Ontogenesis is always *sociogenesis*: an autopoiesis or construction of agency that works within or against a normative structure. Finally, the second reading of the novel, in contrast, begins to show how the invisibility emphasized by the later Merleau-Ponty (and developed throughout his work through his dialogue with Kant) can be used as an argument for the positive significance of contexts of invisibility, as the violent exclusionary forces of

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (1965), p47.

²⁶ *Invisible Man*, p34.

recognition come into play once again. In this way, different, invisible histories may yet be written.

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