

Metaphoric Truth:
Seeing and Saying in Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, Ethics via Zuidervaart

by

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Abstract

Artistic meaning as expressed in visual art and literary fiction has long been debated in modern aesthetic thought. In structuralist thinkers such as Saussure and existentialists such as Sartre, the roles of verbal language and visual art are opposed. In postmodernist aesthetic projects, language has been incorporated as a cognitive component. Examining Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Paul Ricoeur's writings on painting and language, respectively, this thesis traces their shared interest in art and language, an interest whose phenomenological aim is the revelation of being in works of the imagination. Lambert Zuidervaat's approach to artistic truth opens the lifeworld to consideration of other creatures in the biotic context of the earth itself. His work charts a role for imaginative disclosure as integral to work in techno-scientific and art realms. A pairing of their work in the verbal and non-verbal realms on themes of embodiment, natality, expression, and metaphorical truth illuminates the problematic of meaning in forms of postmodern visual art such as installation, land art, and text-based sculptural work. The terms *metaphoric imagination* and *metaphor* are used interchangeably, denoting how metaphor can be viewed as a principle of articulation, not only as a figure of speech. Metaphor is seen as connecting aesthetic projects with the lifeworld in a hermeneutic circle of meaning

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
List of Abbreviations	vi
List of Figures	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Paul Ricoeur: From the Problematic of Evil to Metaphor	3
1 <i>The Rule of Metaphor: An Overview</i>	4
2 Rhetoric and the Classical Tradition	5
3 Language Aims Beyond Itself	7
4 “No Metaphors in Dictionaries”	8
5 Resemblance	9
6 Iconicity	10
7 Image: The Slippery Slope.....	12
8 Reference and Discourse: “Something Must Be for Something To Be Said”	14
9 Semiotics and Semantics.....	15
10 Reference and Metaphor	15
11 Towards Metaphorical Truth	17
Chapter 2: Merleau-Ponty and Mediated Experience	20
1 The Body and the World.....	20
2 Language and Meaning, Self and Other.....	22
2.1 An Embodied Perspective.....	23
3 Linguistic Ontology: Embodiment and Expression	24
4 Expression: Dynamic Embodiment and Reversibility	27
5 The Cultural World: “Ideas without Equivalents”	30
5.1 Language	30
5.2 Painting.....	32
Chapter 3: Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty – Narrative Actualization, Thinking Expression.....	34
1 Metaphor and Expression	36
1.1 Emergent Meaning and Natality.....	36
1.2 Narrative Time and Constitution of the Self	40
1.3 Aesthetic Ontology.....	42
2 Fiction and History: Trace, Erasure, Signature, Style.....	44
3 Truth in Fiction: The Constructed Self and Others.....	46
3.1 Shared Premise: Divergent Outcomes.....	46
3.1.1 Reversibility.....	47
3.1.2 Sedimented Meaning	48
Chapter 4: Ethical Expression for Wider Worlds	51
1 Zuidervart’s Concept of Disclosure: Site, Opening, Genesis	51

2	Intersubjective Processes: Mending the Fence between Art and Science.....	52
3	Imaginative Disclosure: Expression, Presentation, Import	54
5	Perception and Expression	56
6	Nativity: Inauguration of Hope	59
7	Retrieval: Ethical Imagination	61
Chapter 5: Visual Metaphor.....		63
1	Aesthetic Ontology	63
2	Reading the Visual as Metaphoric Utterance	64
3	Abstraction and the Metaphoric Imagination: Howard Hodgkin	66
4	Linguistically Turned: Amy Loewan.....	71
5	Art Practice: Living Experience, Metaphoric Process.....	75
6	Living Experience, Environmentally Turned: Stacy Levy	76
7	Ontological Reconnection of Voice and Vision: Spencer Turnick	81
8	Time and Meaning.....	84
9	“Pastor of Oaks, Shepherd of Stones”: Ian Hamilton Finlay.....	87
10	Conclusion.....	90
References		92

List of Abbreviations

Texts by Merleau-Ponty

CAL	<i>Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language</i>
EM	<i>“Eye and Mind”</i>
ILVS	<i>“Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”</i>
PP	<i>Phenomenology of Perception</i>
PrP	<i>The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays</i>
PW	<i>The Prose of the World</i>
VI	<i>The Visible and the Invisible</i>

Texts by Ricoeur

FT	<i>From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II</i>
RM	<i>The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language</i>
RR	<i>A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination</i>
TN ₁	<i>Time and Narrative, vol. 1</i>
TN ₂	<i>Time and Narrative, vol. 2</i>
TN ₃	<i>Time and Narrative, vol. 3</i>

Text by Zuidervaart

AT	<i>Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure</i>
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List of Figures

<i>Figure 1. The visible and the invisible</i>	48
<i>Figure 2. Howard Hodgkin, Italy, 1998-2002; oil on wood</i>	69
<i>Figure 3. Howard Hodgkin, After Corot, 1979-1982; oil on wood</i>	70
<i>Figure 4. Amy Loewan, Detail: Peace 5, 2002; woven rice paper, graphite, ink</i>	73
<i>Figure 5. Amy Loewan, Peace 5, 2002; woven rice paper, ink, graphite (8' x 4')</i>	74
<i>Figure 6. Stacy Levy, Tide Flowers, 2004–2008; 40 pylons of marine vinyl, polycarbonate plastic, and steel (9' x 9' x 9'); Hudson River Park, New York, NY</i>	78
<i>Figure 7. Stacy Levy, Watermap, 2009; carved stone; Wynwood, PA</i>	80
<i>Figure 8. Spencer Turnick, Switzerland, Aletsch, Glacier 4 (Greenpeace), 2007</i>	83
<i>Figure 9. Spencer Turnick, Cleveland, Ohio 1, 2004</i>	83
<i>Figure 10. Ian Hamilton Finlay, The Shady Grove, The Murmuring Stream, The Shady Stream, The Murmuring Grove; granite</i>	89

Introduction

The project of this thesis is to investigate the intersection of the thought of Paul Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty with respect to metaphor in verbal and non-verbal aesthetic forms and to see to what degree their thought on the subject is consonant with the ethical considerations of the Toronto philosopher Lambert Zuidervaart as expressed in his 2004 book *Artistic Truth*. There are two questions that are a constant consideration in my own work: the question of artistic meaning and the question of artistic import. This thesis will propose that the thought of these three philosophers has important points of intersection in the way these two vital issues are treated. Mutually resistant to the idea that the visual and the verbal are autonomous realms of meaning, all three embrace the pre-linguistic visual component of articulated philosophical reflection regarding aesthetic production. All three conclude that aesthetic production is inherently intersubjective. This intersubjectivity lays the framework for the ethical implications of artistic projects. Though elaborated most fully by Zuidervaart, the ethical implications of such an approach to artistic meaning is found explicitly in Ricoeur with respect to narrative texts and in Merleau-Ponty with respect to painting. Read together, the work of these philosophers is able to offer the practicing artist a compelling argument for the understanding of works of the imagination as a revelation of being with the concomitant intersubjective ethics this entails.

We are saved or lost together says Merleau-Ponty. His account of embodiment extended to language and painting grounds my awareness of my starting point for the practice of art. As we shall see, Ricoeur's formulation of metaphor as a principle of articulation of a way of being in the world, of being in the world of the work, and of being in the intersubjective world with an explicit ethics connects aesthetic projects with the lifeworld in a hermeneutic circle. Zuidervaart's work on artistic truth as part of a larger conception of truth illuminates an awareness of our relation to the biotic world including other creatures as persons, worthy of ethical care. His precise formulation of expression, presentation and import of imaginative disclosure, broadened to include techno-scientific work as well as art, positions art-making as part of many human endeavours of cultural pathfinding.

Chapters One and Two trace some aspects of the thought of Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty respectively with regard to metaphor, language and painting. Chapter Three examines the intersection of their thought. Chapter Four briefly positions the investigation of metaphorical truth found in the work of Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty with a short rehearsal of Zuidervaart's conception of artistic truth. Chapter Five investigates ways in which their hermeneutic adds to the unfolding of selected works by four diverse artists. The art selected moves from painting to works incorporating text in site-specific contexts. The ethical dimension of art making, in verbal and non-verbal work is of prime importance. The ethical dimension is that which will result in 'better or worse attempts' at 'lifegiving disclosure.'

Chapter 1: Paul Ricoeur: From the Problematic of Evil to Metaphor

Ricoeur's reputation as a "philosopher of faith" rather than as a "philosopher of suspicion" is clearly demonstrated in his commitment to the interpretation of meaning. For Ricoeur, meaning is fundamentally linguistic, even though it stands within the poles of "extra-linguistic" and "pre-semantic" human experience.¹ In this chapter I look at Ricoeur's work on metaphor as it unveils a new way of understanding the metaphoric imagination.

Ricoeur's long career began with a study of the problematic of evil. His early, phenomenological investigations into evil, in works such as *Fallible Man* (1960) and *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960), showed that direct language is used to express "purpose, motive, and 'I can,' but we speak of evil by means of metaphors such as estrangement, errance, burden, and bondage. Moreover, these primary symbols do not occur unless they are embedded within intricate narratives of myth, which tell the story of how evil began" (RM, 374). They prompted a further study of language, focusing on metaphor.² In later investigations of metaphor he treated themes of time, narrative, ethics, the self, and other.

He was inspired to focus on metaphor by his reflections on psychoanalytic theory and the rise of structuralism in France; his continuing interest in religious language; and his reading of British and American studies of ordinary language (RM, 375). He came to view metaphor as a principle of articulation of the world. For him it is historical, fundamentally intersubjective, and ethical: "Since our understanding of the world is

¹ Mary Gerhart, "The Live Metaphor," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, Vol. 22 of *The Library of Living Philosophers*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 216.

² Ricoeur outlined the circumstances that prompted his work on language in "From Existentialism to the Philosophy of Language," published as an appendix in the 1977 English edition of RM.

articulated by metaphor, and since metaphor is essentially a literary phenomenon, literature has a fundamental quality of instructing us in how life is lived by humans.”³

Ricoeur’s thorough investigation of metaphor is his attempt “to incorporate within hermeneutics as much as [he] could of this structural approach by means of a better connection between the stage of objective explanation and the stage of subjective appropriation” (RM, 377). If language can be shown to be more than a system of “closed signs, within which each element merely refers to the other elements of the system,” then the “claim of hermeneutics to reach beyond the ‘sense’ . . . as the immanent content of the text . . . to its ‘reference,’ i.e., to what it says *about* the world,” can be argued convincingly (RM, 377).

As Ricoeur argues, time immediately enters into any conception of metaphor as a process. An unfolding of meaning happens in time – lived time: lived by individuals and by groups remembered in history. Symbol and myth are constituted by an individual’s time and by historical time. The individual thus forms a point of convergence between past, future, and the manifest succession of moments that we term the present.

In line with Husserl’s phenomenological analysis, Ricoeur states that “language is intentional par excellence; it aims beyond itself” (RM, 86). The breadth of Ricoeur’s cross-disciplinary work in areas of “religion and biblical exegesis, history, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, legal studies and politics” is emblematic of his thesis that language has a purchase on the world.⁴

1 *The Rule of Metaphor: An Overview*

By the 1970s, Ricoeur’s focus on the semantic imagination prompted him to investigate metaphor, beginning with a study of the classical rhetorical tradition – at the level of the

³ Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (London: Routledge, 2003), 5.

⁴ Simms, 1.

word.⁵ He examined traditional theories of metaphor, from Aristotle through I. A. Richards, Max Black, Monroe Beardsley, and Roman Jakobson,⁶ tracing the evolution of metaphor from semiotics, the study of the word as sign or symbol, to semantics, where the word functions at the level of the sentence, and finally to metaphor, as a rule-governed deformation of meaning via discourse.

The result of these investigations was *The Rule of Metaphor*, his study of the semantic roots of metaphor. Metaphor was no longer to be interpreted rhetorically, according to classical models, as a figure of speech. Rather, it was to take on a larger, active, and creative meaning within discourse as a whole (RM, 251). A brief overview of the key ideas in *The Rule of Metaphor* follows.

2 Rhetoric and the Classical Tradition

In the first of *The Rule of Metaphor's* eight studies, Ricoeur critiques Aristotle's theory of metaphor as a figure of speech. Ricoeur retains two features of Aristotle's analysis: the function of *mimêsis*, or *making*; and the notion that metaphor will surprise and delight the reader with unexpected borrowings (RM, 37). The imitative function of *mimêsis* is in tension with *muthos*, the classical aspect of tragedy involved in plotting, ordering, and arranging a poem or play (RM, 41). Plotting necessarily involves the plotting of human action, which involves an implicit ethical dimension. There are better and worse human actions:

Thus, *muthos* is not just a rearrangement of human action into a more coherent form, but a structuring that elevates this action; so *mimêsis* preserves and represents that which is human, not just in its essential features, but in a way that makes it greater and nobler. (RM, 45)

⁵ Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, Vol. 22 of *The Library of Living Philosophers* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 16.

⁶ Mark S. Muldoon, *On Ricoeur* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002), 57.

In an important move, Ricoeur also links *poiêsis* and *mimêsis*: the “creative dimension” and the “referential movement” (RM, 44). Thus metaphor is firmly bound to making sense of the world.

At this stage in Ricoeur’s study, metaphor has been released from the level of the single word to significance within the fictive work as a whole, and it is now established – on the foundation of *mimêsis* – as an active representation of meaning; human meaning, meaning *for us*. The phenomenological and ontological significance of metaphoric utterance rests on this paradoxical connection between imitation and ordering, which is tensional and active in the work of the metaphoric imagination. The imitative aspect of *mimêsis* “reminds us that no discourse ever suspends our belonging to a world” (RM, 48). Discourse occurs “within the horizons of a being-in-the-world which it makes present to the precise extent that the *mimêsis* raises it to the level of *muthos*” (RM, 48). Imitative and making elements of the metaphoric imagination tie the speaker, writer, and artist to the world. Reality is approached as *being* and not just as some thing, “that-thing-over-there” (RM 48):

To present men “*as acting*” and all things “*as in act*” – such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears as blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action *as* actualized. (RM, 48)

Ricoeur highlights the importance of the active ontological function of discourse in his discussion of the demise of rhetoric in Western thought in his second study. Rhetoric’s power has largely diminished, becoming merely a category of persuasion, an ornament of speech, and is thus dead in power, image making, and truthfulness. But Ricoeur sees metaphor as distinct from rhetorical ornament: as a principle of articulation of the lifeworld, it has the possibility of truth. He highlights the power of invention in generating new meaning in Study 2, where he distinguishes between the catachresis-trope and figure-trope (RM, 73). He rejects the catachresis-trope as metaphor on the grounds that it simply supplants the usual meaning with another single meaning (RM, 71). His use of metaphor shifts from *word* to *discourse*, where the generation of surprise, astonishment, and colour “through new and unexpected combinations” shows the “free

usage” of metaphor. A consideration of freedom, invention, operation at the level of discourse, and generation are the culmination of this study.

3 Language Aims Beyond Itself

Mary Gerhart points out that Study 3 “contains the key, the decisive step of Ricoeur’s theory.”⁷ Here, Ricoeur retains the distinction between *signs* and *sentence* that he gleans from Emile Benveniste (RM, 76): the sentence is irreducible to its parts, since its meaning inheres in the sentence as a whole. This argument from Benveniste permits Ricoeur to oppose the structuralism of de Saussure, which he regards as too narrow. Language is more than a system of signs, so that “to characterize language in just one of its aspects and not in its total reality” is to reduce freedom and the prospect of truthful utterance (RM, 79).

In Studies 3 to 5 Ricoeur poses and explores the question of what a live metaphor is by clarifying what it is not. Language is acknowledged to be a system of signs; but “language passes outside itself; reference is the mark of the self-transcendence of language” (RM, 85). This point marks the “fundamental difference between semantics and semiotics” (RM, 85). Therefore, as Mary Gerhart states,

[L]anguage . . . is neither totally systematic nor unsystematic. By utilizing both theories, that of substitution and that of tension, Ricoeur goes beyond the most adequate positions on metaphor up to this time.⁸

Reference is a key concept. Language is always referential, “saying something about something to someone” since “no discourse ever suspends our belonging to a world” (RM, 48). Ricoeur points to the absurdity of thinking of language as a closed sign system referential only to other signs, since language is inextricably linked to the real world. Language points beyond itself, making truth claims about the world. Language in this self-transcendent sense implies a mediatory function, a function that “integrates”

⁷ Gerhart, 219.

⁸ Gerhart, 221.

humans within society and “assures the correspondence between language and world” (RM, 85). Language does this by means of metaphor, a term used in this thesis as metaphoric utterance: metaphoric imagination understood as an active principle.

4 “No Metaphors in Dictionaries”

Words can be taken in both a literal and a metaphoric manner. Ricoeur gives the example of Mallarmé’s image, “the sky is dead,” as a “flagrant predicative impertinence, since the predicate *is dead* is compatible only with individuals belonging to the category of living beings” (RM, 178–79). The literal meaning of the image is contradicted literally but the process of metaphor is one of reduction as the speaker attributes new meaning to one of the words. Speech and language are brought into play as the sedimented meaning is shocked, through literal deviation, and the speaker and hearer are forced to confront new meaning in this context.

Two processes are manifest in the metaphoric imagination at work. Deviation or *impertinence* and the reduction of deviation through the attribution of new meaning via *metaphor*. Ricoeur follows the work of Jean Cohen in outlining this double process. New meaning erupts in the play of significations as deviation from the literal meaning prompts a plenitude of possible meanings. They are not random, but arise from the tradition of sedimented and lexical meanings available to the writer and speaker. This deviation is not psychological, based on associationism, despite what Ricoeur terms the “false symmetry between metaphor and metonymy” (RM, 154).

To say that “my love is like a red, red rose” has much more going on than a likeness between flowers and women, though likeness is part of the saying’s enduring appeal. Ricoeur ties deviation to the complete expression, contextualizing the word so that the whole expression is an instance of predication to a subject that “yields while protesting,” a term he borrows from Nelson Goodman (RM, 154).

Ordinary speech plays with language and is open to infinite possibilities of expression. The “interior” space dwelling between sign and meaning is surrounded by an

"exterior" space where the world is referent (RM, 210). For Ricoeur, the problem of reference is the point of contact with structuralism. Though he agrees with the structuralists' emphasis on ordinary operations of making sense, he refuses to follow their semiotic model, and his argument, that "metaphor functions at the syntagmatic level, at the level where the meaning of the sentence is achieved," is crucial (RM, 87). Only in the sentence and in discourse can metaphor as an operation restructure meaning. However, polysemy, the "open structure of words, and their capacity to acquire new significations without losing their old ones," is essential (RM, 170). Deviation is possible at the level of discourse since the reader or hearer of language always has an implicit or virtual understanding of living language. Deviation can only take place against a code that is already manifested in the living use of language in ordinary speech.

5 Resemblance

Study 6 positions the notion of the substitution of words (in the use of simile) within Ricoeur's theory of interaction. Traditionally, modern ideas of contiguity and resemblance can be included in the idea of substitution as a rhetorical theory of metaphor. Ricoeur agrees that resemblance does "set in motion . . . the metaphorical transposition of names, and more generally, of words," but he does not conclude that this explains the function of metaphor (RM, 205). He turns to Roman Jakobson's work to separate the supposed conjunction of substitution and resemblance.

Ricoeur views substitution and selection as "two faces of a single operation" and says they are oriented respectively toward the poles of metonymic and metaphoric linguistic operations (RM, 207). Since these are operations, not figures of speech, they are propelled beyond tropology onto the level of discourse. Resemblance is important but it must be liberated from the notion of comparison, one of Aristotle's types of metaphor. For Ricoeur, comparison comes too close to the simple association of ideas in metaphor and comes dangerously close to psychological association. Though he does not explicitly confront Freud in the analyses undertaken in *The Rule of Metaphor*, his allergy

to associationism and psychologism points towards his concern to open the world of the imagination to freedom and unlimited possibility rather than the reductionism of psychoanalysis (RM, 375–76).

Imagery, understood in terms of poetic diction, is bound by selection, an act of ordering, because it is constructed. Therefore, it requires the work of a culturally constructed and interpreted metaphoric imagination. Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, philosophers of suspicion and “fathers of this reductive method, . . . explain symbols and myths as fruits of unconscious representations” (RM, 376). For them, the role of the imagination is weakly reproductive of libidinal impulses and the super-ego. But Ricoeur claims imagination’s role in having reference to the world at the level of consciousness and interpretation.

Structuralism, which developed in France in the 1960s, relied (as Ricoeur says)

[o]n the affirmation that language, before being a process or an event, is a system, and . . . this system is not established at the level of the speaker’s consciousness, but at a lower level, that of a kind of structured unconscious. (RM, 376–77)

However, Ricoeur affirms language as a meaning event. If metaphor as a process is sparked by reciprocity between world and language, and is manifested as a conscious intentional action, it resists reduction to a kind of psychological determinism or automatism. Ricoeur does not wish to lose the emotional content of metaphor, nor does he wish to elevate the text to an ultimately nonreferential world of its own where signs relate only to other signs. Rather, Ricoeur wishes to preserve the embodied element in metaphor in conjunction with the interpretive function.

6 Iconicity

Study 6 also sees Ricoeur developing a concept of *iconicity*. Icon, as part of metaphor, includes sense and interpretation – an elaboration in some ways of *mimêsis* and *muthos*. Iconicity includes the pre-linguistic experience of the world as seen that brings in notions of similarity or likeness. Thought pairs disparate entities through an

imaginative leap that finds connections beyond the merely imitative. This mixture of thought and experience opens the range of the metaphor and gives interpretation an “unlimited field.”⁹ Gerhart points out that “[t]o be read means to accord to the reader an original right to all the data. To interpret is to invest meaning in the imaginary by means of the nonreferential object.”¹⁰

For Ricoeur, the metaphoric function is tied to seeing and particularly to Wittgenstein’s *seeing-as*, which is “half thought and half experience” and akin to the “iconicity of meaning” offered by metaphoric utterance (RM, 251). Ricoeur draws on Aristotle’s commentary, for “to metaphorize well is to see, . . . to contemplate, to have the right eye for . . . the similar” (RM, 231). Metaphorization involves reaching for new expression on the basis of lived experience and cultural tradition. The underlying theme of ontology becomes visible within this careful semantic investigation for linguistic expression is embedded in experience of the world, in being.

New meaning is made through the speaker’s use of language. Much joy, intellectual excitement, and life bubble up in the company of those who use language creatively. Of course, much everyday language uses the worn coin of dead metaphor, shop-worn expressions that do not shock us into new revelation. Ricoeur is interested in how the metaphoric imagination can extend the limits of language and thought. Ricoeur built upon his theory of metaphor as a principle of articulation. He develops a theory of narrativity in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*, a series dealing with metaphorical utterance, history, and narrativity which he saw as a sequel to *The Rule of Metaphor*. This theory of narrativity can be viewed as an enlargement of the theory of metaphor into the realm of texts – biblical, fictional, and historical. Narrativity involves prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration,¹¹ analogous to Gestalt psychology’s

⁹ Gerhart, 222.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hahn, 14.

invention, in which a new structure emerges (with a sudden intuition) through the “obliteration and modification of the prior configuration” (RM, 231).

Much later in his career, he wrote an analysis of *The Symbolism of Evil*, *The Rule of Metaphor*, and *Time and Narrative*, calling them “poetics” in the sense that they were “an investigation of the multiple modalities of . . . an ordered creation, illustrated not only by the great myths on the origin of evil, but also by poetic metaphors and narrative plots.”¹² His concern was always to vivify metaphoric utterance so that ontology could be a possibility in metaphoric statements. In this way, both poetry and philosophy could have a *rapprochement* and be able to “think more” (RM, 358).

7 Image: The Slippery Slope

Ricoeur’s theory of the imagination, built upon his concept of metaphor as “metaphoric utterance,” focuses resolutely on the linguistic rather than on any venturing into the realm of visual arts.¹³ The role of the image in philosophical theories of the imagination could account to some degree for his emphasis on language and narrative. Ricoeur highlights four points regarding this role. First, images can denote something absent but existing somewhere else. Secondly, graphic depictions have their own physical existence but “[their] function is to ‘take the place of’ the things they represent.” Thirdly, fictional images such as dreams, dramas, and novels may be unreal. Finally, images may depict illusions that are convincingly real to the observer.¹⁴ Ricoeur discards the theory, received from Plato through Hume and Sartre, of the *reproductive imagination*, in which the image is a weaker version of perception.¹⁵ He also rejects theories of the *productive imagination* which, in asserting that imagination produces

¹² Hahn, 14.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and Action,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 172.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

unreal phantasms, severs the link with perception. Belief and the suspension of disbelief vary noetically, depending on the critical consciousness of the observer. From this point of view, imagination is a source of error. Even the Husserlian transcendental reduction that brings about a “neutralization of existence” is an aporia that does not give an account of the *act of distinguishing* by which, as Ricoeur says, “a consciousness posits something at a distance from the real and thus produces otherness at the very heart of experience.”¹⁶ Ricoeur’s movement away from a mimetic notion of language bodes well for a consideration of metaphoric utterance in visual art for imaginative utterance does more than replicate or imitate. The true function of metaphoric utterance is creative and novel meaning in both language and art. It involves perception and thinking simultaneously.

Metaphor offers Ricoeur access to the phenomenon of the imagination because it builds upon presemantic, lived experience; it is not perceptual in its functioning. The image is not screened in some interior theatre and then spoken, but arises as part of the work of discourse. Ricoeur argues for the work of resemblance in the “iconic moment” of the metaphor; but this is emphatically a logical moment, restricted to the “Kantian productive imagination”: “In this sense, the notion of schematism of metaphoric attribution does not violate the boundaries of a semantic theory, that is, of a theory of verbal meaning” (RM, 256). Language, via the metaphoric utterance, brings intuitions and concepts forward for discussion between subjects, and provides a history for itself via texts.

Seeing-as comes into play in the work of resemblance, but without any associationism or psychologism, in Ricoeur’s argument. (Psychologism would limit the free open play of the metaphoric imagination, perhaps in the manner of Scrooge’s attribution of the manifestation of Marley’s ghost to undigested dinner rather than to his own moral turpitude.) Ricoeur does not deny the nonverbal moment’s role in the work of

¹⁶ Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and Action,” 170.

metaphoric utterance; seeing-as is an intuitive experience or act, “by which one selects from the quasi-sensory mass of imagery one has on reading metaphor the relevant aspects of such imagery” (RM, 252). Study 6 is dedicated to Mikel Dufrenne, who pursued a rigorous understanding of a phenomenological and ontological philosophy of works of art. Ricoeur’s chooses the linguistic realm for investigation but is conversant with analyses of art by his contemporaries such as Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne. Both Ricoeur and Dufrenne see the stakes for literature and art as ontological. Dufrenne comments: “Since virtual knowledge is in turn knowledge of the *a priori* in its objective, cosmological embodiments, there is an inner link between the subject and the content of his experience: The existential and the cosmological are one.”¹⁷ The inner link between subject and world is inherent in language and in art. It is foundational for the reference of human culture to other human beings and to the real world. Nevertheless, Ricoeur considers the image primarily from a linguistic perspective as material for the construction of overarching metaphoric utterance in narrative texts.

8 Reference and Discourse: “Something Must Be for Something To Be Said”

Ricoeur discusses what the metaphorical statement says about reality at the beginning of Study 7:¹⁸ what is said refers to an extralinguistic world, about what and to whom things are said. This concept of reference does not apply at the semiotic level (RM, 256), for there “the sign points back only to other signs immanent within a system,” whereas “discourse is about things” (RM, 257). Reference is found (and meaning articulated) at the level of discourse. Discourse is hermeneutic, requiring interpretation between speakers; it is not a lexicon of pre-established words and sentences.

This is a vital distinction separating Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor and its extension as part of a theory of imagination from the empiricism of Wittgenstein. Mary Gerhart

¹⁷ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* [Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique], trans. Edward S. Casey and others (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 55.

¹⁸ Study 7 is dedicated to Mircea Eliade, whose work on comparative religion was very influential on Ricoeur’s own thinking.

perceptively points out that Wittgenstein and other British analysts “take as their unit of signification the individual speaker,” but Ricoeur “takes as his base the community of ‘speaking-beings.’”¹⁹ Reference involves more than one speaker and an immediate trans-subjectivity. Speaking is not an individual act but an act based on a past that the subject did not create.

9 Semiotics and Semantics

Ricoeur distinguishes semiotics and semantics in Study 3 (RM, 76–87). To paraphrase, the semiotic sign is restricted to the world of signs, but semantics relates the sign to reference (RM, 256), which transcends language. A striving for truth “suffuses” the entire enterprise of naming, designating, and expressing. A lingering Aristotelianism—where words name, designate, and express in isolation from the larger units of sentence and literary work—persists in Ricoeur’s analysis. However, for Ricoeur, the work of naming, designating, and expressing is done through a polarity of word and sentence, and it is always through these elements together that sense is made and reference is achieved.

Ricoeur works through the linguistic theories of British analysts including John Searle, Peter Strawson, and Gilles Granger, and picks up Gottlob Frege’s insight that we “presuppose a reference” (RM, 258). Searle, in particular, states the thesis that “something must be in order that something may be identified” (RM, 258). The identifying function of language is set upon a foundation of existence but the predicate characterizes the thing that is identified. This point helps to clarify the argument that Ricoeur makes concerning universals: universals are a characterization and not an existential thing.

10 Reference and Metaphor

¹⁹ Gerhart, 230.

Ricoeur's next claim concerns the consideration of discourse as text or discourse rather than as semantic sentence or semiotic signs. Texts, compositions, and literature are not simply works with accumulations of sentences (RM, 259); as works of the productive imagination with reference to the lifeworld, they provoke a corresponding hermeneutic of productive interpretation. Production and interpretation translate the "structure of the work to [the] world of the work" (RM, 260). Such written works create a world with external reference and an internal reference larger than the semiotic.

Against those who would claim the truth of reference only for scientific texts, Ricoeur claims reference as key to the ontological claim of communicability in the world of literary texts. To maintain the truth of scientific reference within his theory of metaphor he proposes two levels of reference. Suspension of the first-level reference permits an opening up of exploration for language and a space for new meaning, allowing metaphor to point beyond language to translinguistic referents:

Just as the metaphorical statement captures its sense as metaphorical amidst the ruins of the literal sense, it also achieves its reference of what might be called (in symmetrical fashion) its literal reference. If it is true that literal sense and metaphorical sense are distinguished and articulated within an interpretation, so too it is within an interpretation that a second-level reference, which is properly the metaphorical reference, is set free by means of the suspension of the first-level reference. (RM, 21)

Ricoeur's unique contribution to the study of what he later terms the *metaphoric function* becomes apparent in his reply to an essay by Mary Gerhart. He mentions that his interest in metaphor is in *live metaphor*—in metaphoric function or utterance. He recalls Nietzsche's, Heidegger's, and Derrida's rejection of metaphor within philosophical discourse as an interest in dead metaphor, and recapitulates his own interests as follows:

1. the relation of the linguistic component to pre-semantic features . . . ;
2. the passage from a theory of nominal deviance to a theory of predicative deviance;
3. the role of the creative imagination in apprehending resemblances; and

4. finally, the task of the re-description of the real as the effect of metaphorical reference.²⁰

For empiricists such as Wittgenstein, language cannot reference the real but remains caught in language games – for “although such a conception has no trouble explaining the choreography of labels, . . . there is no essence to block re-labelling” (RM, 282). But Ricoeur’s fourth point, the “re-description of the real,” is far from the classical theories of metaphor. It is the focus of my current discussion.

11 Towards Metaphorical Truth

Ricoeur provides a lengthy discussion of models and metaphors in Study 7. His epigenetic, cumulative mode of thought leads him to construct a theory of metaphoric function that is not in conflict with the descriptive models of scientific language. In fact, agreeing with Mary Hesse, he finds that metaphor functions there as well, for scientific models require recourse to metaphorical redescription for new predictions based on observational models. Reduction is always broken open in the context of new information and therefore requires redescription. Ricoeur quotes Hesse’s point that “rationality consists just in the continuous adaptation of our language to our continually expanding world, and metaphor is one of the chief means by which this is accomplished” (RM, 287). However, Ricoeur’s primary goal is still to affirm the concept of “metaphorical truth” as having a distinct sphere of truth at the mythic level. If this can be established, the power of myth and history is not diminished or superseded by the descriptive truth of science.

In Ricoeur’s interactive, tensional theory of metaphor, metaphorical truth emerges from the ruins of literal sense through the “semantic impertinence” created by the tension between the literal sense of words and the indirect expression of the language of the poet. These two senses contest each other for meaning so that there is a “split reference”

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “Reply to Mary Gerhart,” in Hahn, 233.

between terms. Another tension of fundamental importance consists of the copula Ricoeur finds so eloquently expressed in his example of the Portuguese storyteller, who states that his story both “is” and “is not” literally true (RM, 303).

Two levels of reference are necessary to interpret narrative, story, or poem and we must bring judgement and experience to our interiorization of it. Without the split vision of the copula, poetry cannot mean anything. The world of the poem is a newly invented one, and its three elements – literal sense, metaphorical sense, and the copula – offer fictive and real possibilities conjoined in an active dynamism.

The goal for Ricoeur in examining previous theories of metaphor is to stake a claim for the truth of metaphorical utterance. He establishes the reference of metaphor to the world partly due to the “givenness” of the individual’s biological, cultural, and social milieu. In *The Rule of Metaphor*, he hints at establishing the truth of the world of the work so that it supports the “ontological postulate,” and further develops this theme in *Time and Narrative*.

Eugene Kaelin criticizes Ricoeur’s emphasis and reliance on literature and history for his aesthetics.²¹ He draws parallels to Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle, seeming to agree with him that the ontological structure that dominates Dasein is our being-unto-death. Ricoeur’s emphasis on individuals remaking themselves in the narrative of their own life unites with his interest in practical wisdom on how a good life can be lived. In this way, his project is being-unto-life. Kaelin distinguishes between the “surface and depth” of aesthetic expression, mapping that on Heidegger’s notion of strife between “earth” and “world.” Kaelin sees a lack of appreciation of poetic diction or “melody” in Ricoeur’s analysis and seems to wish for the ontological transparency, proposed by Husserl, that both Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty reject. The Kantian sense of disinterested pleasure dominates Kaelin’s version of metaphorical utterance. However, because

²¹ Eugene F. Kaelin, “Ricoeur’s Aesthetics: On How to Read a Metaphor,” in Hahn, 250–51.

Ricoeur's interests are ontological and ethical, for Ricoeur disinterested pleasure is abstract, lacking engagement with the lifeworld.

Ricoeur is interested in how humans live creatively in the world of self and others. Therefore, for him, aesthetic pleasure is a referent of creativity. The role of the reader in refiguring the world of the text is considered in Ricoeur's reply as "metaphorization, in the broader sense of the term, of the reader's entire experience."²² Within the active dynamic of "metaphorization," intellectual knowledge of the plot, the process of emplotment, and the affective dimension of *catharsis* unite.

Ricoeur's tensional theory of metaphor integrates and positions the world of the work, the reader of the work, and the author of the work within the lifeworld in a dynamic, hermeneutic circle. This tensional aspect of Ricoeur's theory is vital, for no direct transparency of self to self can be accessed in aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is mediated experience, and as Ricoeur has proposed, the self finds its realization in participating in aesthetic experiences, primarily the act of reading.²³ Mediated aesthetic experience is not limited to the domains of literature and art; since the process gives rise to meaning, it is part of the fictive world of the text as well as of the nonfictive domain of history and science. Creativity and freedom find expression in these domains and language cannot be pinned down, forever embalmed in only one mode of articulation. Multiple perspectives can be brought to language and texts, and interpreted against tradition and history and within the inauguration of new history. Language refers beyond itself and meaning finds its advent.

²² Paul Ricoeur, "Reply to Eugene F. Kaelin," in Hahn, 256.

²³ Reading as a three-part process, an extended form of the tensional theory of metaphor, consists of prefiguration (*mimesis* 1, the prefigured basis of narrative itself); configuration (*mimesis* 2, the configuration of the text); and refiguration (refiguration of the text by the reader; TN₁, 53). The development of this theory, proposed in *Time and Narrative*, is beyond the scope of this paper; however, these terms will be used in the sense described here.

Chapter 2: Merleau-Ponty and Mediated Experience

1 The Body and the World

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the role played by humans in the organization of aesthetic experience. We create a self that dwells in a world of others, including human and nonhuman beings. Our historical and linguistic grasp upon this world arises from our fundamental human situation of embodiment. Embodiment gives rise to Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression, which in turn gives rise to the concept of metaphorical truth. Mediated aesthetic experience that makes truthful metaphorical utterances is integral to his understanding of language and painting.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to offer a comprehensive study of Merleau-Ponty's theory of language, but salient points regarding language from *The Phenomenology of Perception* and later essays are essential for understanding his notion of metaphorical truth. I will begin by tracing his innovative, rich phenomenological treatment of the body and the world before attempting to understand his idea of metaphorical truth.

Several concepts underlie Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body. The body is not primarily material. That would retain the old body/mind duality he attempts to overcome. It is initially "my body" but since it is inherently subjective as situated in a world of bodies. The body is a source of experience and intention, not just sensation:

Bodily experience forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning, which is not the work of a universal-constituting consciousness, a meaning which clings to certain contents. My body is the meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which, nevertheless, exists and is susceptible to disease. (PP, 46)

Thus, the body is not reducible to the formulations of science or idealities of philosophy; and the world is a system of possibilities given by "I can" rather than "I think."

Merleau-Ponty states that the theory of the body is a theory of perception, for there is no isolated perception of the world that is not at the same time an experience of ourselves in the world:

The theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception. We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of its always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception. (PP, 206)

His project is to move past the phenomenological reduction of Husserl, which he sees as retaining an idealist core (PP, xi). In Merleau-Ponty's view, Husserl's transcendentalism still proposes an objective ideality behind the "objective and detached knowledge of the body" (PP, xi). In the Husserlian phenomenological reduction, the natural world has an independent existence that causes our perception of it. In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological reduction, we set aside our web of relationships and our presuppositions, to regain "wonder" in the face of the world (PP, xiii). The phenomenological reduction, "though still necessary, was condemned never to be completed and perhaps never genuinely to begin" (PP, xi): consciousness cannot know itself – or the object of its intention – transparently.

For Merleau-Ponty, a paradoxical ambiguity lies at the heart of existence. Experience of the world rightly resists transformation about the world into thought, except in bracketed instances such as the language of the sciences or social sciences. In Merleau-Ponty's view artists in every discipline benefit from this ambiguity, through the recognition of embodied thought in nondiscursive practices that draw on perceptual experience – no longer only the work of the eye, but of the eye *and* the mind. Yet, far from situating truth *in* the body's perception, Merleau-Ponty invites the philosopher, artist, and reader to resituate the body's perceptions as horizons of meaning. Merleau-Ponty unequivocally situates the other as integral to the world experienced by an individual subject. Here, he reiterates his quarrel with the dualism of Cartesian philosophy and gives primacy to intersubjective relations:

Hitherto the Cogito depreciated the perception of others, teaching me as it did that the I is accessible only to itself, since it defined me as the thought which I

have of myself, and which clearly I am alone in having, at least in this ultimate sense. For the “other” to be more than an empty word, it is necessary that my existence should never be reduced to my bare awareness of existing, but that it should take in also the awareness that one may have of it, and thus include my incarnation in some nature and the possibility, at least, of a historical situation. The Cogito must reveal me in a situation, and it is on this condition alone that transcendental subjectivity can, as Husserl put it, be an intersubjectivity. (PP, xii–xiii)

Clearly, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception is fuelled by a desire to understand the philosophical problems of mind, body, world, and other. He repudiates a theory of sensation, which would reduce the world to nothing but the experience of “states of ourselves,” and also transcendentalism, which too reduces the world, “by regarding it as thought or consciousness of the world” (PP, xv).

2 Language and Meaning, Self and Other

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty outlines much of his early thinking about language. He rejects logical positivism, which would require a “field of ideality in order to become acquainted with and to prevail over its facticity” (PP, xiv, xv). The old problem of universals and particulars surfaces here, along with an abstraction of thought from experience that would reduce experience to the thought of experience rather than the multiplicity of life itself. He rejects a realm of ideality that would deny the imbrication of lived experience. Language rests upon the world. It is supported by a fundamental prelinguistic experience of the world and self:

It is the office of language to cause essences to exist in a state of separation, which is in fact merely apparent, since through language they still rest upon the ante-predicative life of consciousness. In the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape. (PP, xv)

Language is referential, expressive, and existential. It refers to the world already given to the speaker; it expresses the “speaking subject” (*le sujet parlant*) and takes place within an existence marked by time and sedimented history.

Speech is active and meaningful for Merleau-Ponty; the word is not an “empty shell,” a container waiting to be filled (PP, 177). Since thought is revealed in language, the word has meaning and the expressive *making* aspect of language has validity. One uses language to lay claim to thinking:

A thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist even for itself. To Kant’s celebrated question, we can reply that it is indeed part of the experience of thinking, in the sense that we present our thought to ourselves through internal or external speech. It does indeed move forward with the instant and, as it were in flashes, but we are then left to lay hands on it, and it is through expression that we make it our own. The denomination of objects does not follow upon recognition; it is itself recognition. (PP, 177)

Speech acknowledges the other; it is fundamentally intersubjective. Thus, it is intimately bound to the world at individual and cultural levels:

Every language conveys its own teaching and carries its meaning into the listener’s mind. . . . There is, then, a taking up of others’ thought through speech, a reflection in others, an ability to think *according to others* which enriches our own thoughts. Here the meaning of words must be finally induced by the words themselves, or more exactly, their conceptual meaning must be formed by a kind of deduction from a gestural meaning, which is immanent in speech. (PP, 179)

2.1 An Embodied Perspective

Merleau-Ponty offers an embodied perspective on language; like bodily movement, language is an act of agency in the world. Speech is part of the body’s “power of natural expression” (PP, 181). For him, thinking is revealed in speech – it is not prior to it:

I reach back for the word as my hand reaches towards the part of my body which is being pricked; the word has a certain location in my linguistic world, and is part of my equipment. I have only one means of representing it, which is uttering it, just as the artist has only one means of representing the work on which he is engaged: by doing it. (PP, 180)

Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of language moves past a notion of language solely as instrumental. The “at hand” concept of language is later refined and deepened in his dynamic and overarching notion of expression.

Through his concept of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty attempts to heal the mind/body split of Cartesian dualism that permeates much of Western philosophy, from Plato through Augustine to Descartes and to structuralist philosophers such as Saussure. For Merleau-Ponty, embodiment is not sensationism. He requires the phenomenologist to consider the inescapable involvement of the body in all human experience, an involvement that gives rise to the ongoing expressive life of language, art, and other sociocultural and historical formations:

The fact is that if we want to describe it, we must say that my experience breaks forth into things and transcends itself in them, because it always comes into being within the framework of a certain setting in relation to the world which is the definition of my body. . . . It is therefore quite true that any perception of a thing . . . refers back to the positing of a world and of a system of experience in which my body is inescapably linked with phenomena. But the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception. (PP, 303–304)

3 Linguistic Ontology: Embodiment and Expression

Jerry Gill points out that “The whole point of [Merleau-Ponty’s] embodiment theme, whether in reference to existence or speech, is to stress the symbiotic character of the relation between knowing and being.”¹ Gill traces Merleau-Ponty’s *use* of metaphor in his philosophical thinking to focus on Merleau-Ponty’s *theory* of metaphor. For example, early in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of *swimming* to refer to the child’s acquisition of language as a dialectic between inner and outer tensions. A child swims in a sea of language, making sounds in imitation and initiation, inserting his initial attempts in language much as a bather dips her toe into the sea before taking the plunge. Also, meaning is wrapped inextricably with sign from its initial appearance as sound: “phonemes are from the

¹ Jerry Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991), xvi. Gill’s study of the use of metaphor in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical writings gathers together many of Merleau-Ponty’s unsystematic but connected thoughts on the theme of metaphor.

beginning variations of a unique speech apparatus, and that with them the child seems to have ‘caught’ the principle of a mutual differentiation of signs and at the same time to have acquired *the meaning of the sign*” (ILVS, 77). This grasp upon the world, unique to each person, is shown as language:

Language, in its entirety as a style of expression and a unique manner of handling words is anticipated by the child in the first phonemic oppositions. The whole of the spoken language surrounding the child snaps him up like a whirlwind, tempts him by its internal articulations, and brings him almost up to the moment when all this noise begins to mean something. The untiring way in which the train of words crosses and recrosses itself, and the emergence one unimpeachable day of a certain phonemic scale according to which discourse is visibly composed, finally sways the child over to the side of those who speak. Only a language taken as an integral whole enables one to understand how language draws the child to itself and how he comes to enter that domain whose doors, one might think, open only from within. It is because the sign is diacritical from the outset, because it is composed and organized in terms of itself, that it has an interior and ends up laying claim to a meaning. (ILVS, 78)

Merleau-Ponty makes this point in another form in *Signs*, where he again stresses that language points “beyond itself”:

The reason why a language finally intends to say and does say something is not that each sign is a vehicle for a signification that allegedly belongs to it, but that all the signs together allude to a signification which is always in abeyance when they are considered singly, and which I go beyond them toward without their ever containing it. (*Signs*, 83)

Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language points to a holistic mode of discourse, signifying beyond the level of sign. The “immanence of the whole in the parts” (ILVS, 78) is crucial but, beyond that, the notion of the individual’s bodily grasp upon the world through language is vital for my project in this thesis of examining metaphoric utterance.

Language is metaphoric as it functions as a multivalent system of signification and always has a “halo” of signification, meaning more than it says. Speech, writing, art, science, music – all sociocultural and scientific expressions – are a taking hold of the world, not a passive reception of received notions. Merleau-Ponty stays away from the Heideggerian notion of authenticity as a criterion of better or worse expression in the world, for that would lead us “in a circle to call ‘Being’ that which never fully is” (EM,

149). His ontology is not a detached ontology of mind but perhaps an ambiguous ontology of experience that must resist “intellectual adequation,” because:

[i]f one answers that no thought ever detaches itself completely from a sustaining support; that the sole privilege of speaking thought is to have rendered its own support manageable; then the figurations of literature and philosophy are no more settled than those of painting and are no more capable of being accumulated into a stable treasure. (EM, 149)

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of expression is projective. Expressive speech, writing, and art do not arise in isolation from one speaking individual, but bloom from a person engaged in an already expressing world, a world that is speaking and showing where constituted expression is the sea in which the individual swims, leaving her own wake and distinctive stroke pattern, perhaps reaching new shores and charting new courses.

Merleau-Ponty recognizes three uses or functions of language: representation, expression, and the appeal to others:²

The child’s movement towards speech is a constant appeal to others. The child recognizes in the other another one of himself. Language is the means of effecting reciprocity with the other. This is a question of vital operation and not only an intellectual act. The representative function is an aspect of the total act by which we enter into communication with others. (CAL, 31)

Problems arise in Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language from a certain ambiguity of terms and a dispersal of the theme of language throughout several works. As Lawrence Hass points out,

The reader can tell from his arguments there [PP] that the meaning of a word or sentence isn’t merely one’s ideas or intentions, nor is it the referred-to object in the world. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty straightforwardly holds that words themselves bear meaning. But the question remains: precisely *how*?³

Nevertheless, Hass traces out Merleau-Ponty’s “expressive theory of language as a whole by piecing together elements and arguments from writings over the course of his

² Gill.

³ Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 183.

career,” and he remains “convinced that a coherent and compelling theory of language emerges in the end.”⁴

4 Expression: Dynamic Embodiment and Reversibility

Expression is a key component of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language. It arises from his account of perceptual ontology, a synergistic process aimed at unfolding the richness of embodied existence across many fields of thought and creation. Hass says that expression is “Merleau-Ponty’s master term for a creative, productive cognitive power – a power that is rooted in the excess of embodied perceptual life.”⁵ This cognitive process creates embodied knowledge, not abstract knowledge. Metaphor is a dynamic process birthing new expression in embodied cognition. Embodied cognition is expressive, dynamic, and creative, originating new forms and ideas; not fixed, sedimented, received from tradition, and maintained by transcendental ideas of scientific, religious, or psychological models.

Merleau-Ponty’s dynamic concept of expression arises in his critique of Saussure’s linguistic theories.⁶ Sedimented, received language (in Saussure, *la langue*) is welded to speech acts or expressive language (in Saussure, *la parole*), unifying language as an expressive act of the speaking subject. In Saussure’s theory, these forms of language are abstracted and disembodied, allowing the linguistic discipline to claim scientific status. Merleau-Ponty rejects this fundamental divide, proposing instead the notion of *reversibility*, which describes the upwelling of new expression from within a received tradition that leaves space for innovation and new creation. Hass’s formulation of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of reversibility is comprehensive:

Below the abstract level of representation, language is a marvellous conjunction of a social-cultural structure sustained by carnal life, but a structure which can be

⁴ Ibid., 173.

⁵ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 172.

⁶ The following discussion follows Hass’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s debt to Saussure.

transformed and transcended by embodied acts of expression. In a phrase, carnal life and non-material linguistic structures are in a relationship of *reversibility*. They are an intertwining of the visible and the invisible. . . . This is what having a *living* body in your philosophy of language does for you. And it is no small achievement, for it amounts to a promising new way of conceiving language that leaves the structuralist (and the occasional poststructuralist) reduction of the flesh behind.⁷

The living body sustains language as a metaphorical process. Living metaphor is intrinsic to expressive speech which connects the “non-material linguistic structures” with the unique incarnate subject who is also a speaking subject in a world of speaking subjects. Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility is part of a metaphoric understanding of language that rejects structuralist reductions of language. Reversibility describes a process that makes for an upwelling of new meaning in the world and also incorporates new ethical stances, since all meaning involves self and other. It is a concept of “language as an interwoven duality between constituted language and expressive language,” says Hass.⁸ A cycle of constitution and reconstitution via expressive acts is proposed; these are unique to an individual’s originating style and transformative within the constituted, sedimented environment. Both the constituted and expressive aspects of the cycle occur within the matrix of history and culture.

Language is an “interwoven duality” for Merleau-Ponty, but life itself is a triadic interwoven texture of “self-others-things,” a “layer of living experience,” which is temporal, inexpressibly rich, and varied (PP, 57). Language brings judgement into play and is understood as a bringing to birth, an inauguration of meaning. Mikel Dufrenne points out that Merleau-Ponty implies a twofold, coexistent and co-operative vision: a “regime” of vision “regulated according to thought” and a vision that is in act, supporting the thought of vision:⁹

⁷ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 190.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁹ Mikel Dufrenne, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 256–61.

For how does the soul know that space of its body which it extends toward things, that primary *here* from which all the *theres* will come? This space is not, like them, just another mode or specimen of extension; it is the place of the body the soul calls “mine,” a place the soul inhabits. The body it animates is not, for it, an object among objects, and it does not deduce from its body all the rest of space as an implied premise. The soul thinks according to the body, not according to itself, and space, or exterior distance, is also stipulated within the natural pact that unites them. . . .

The body is both the soul’s native space, and the matrix of every other existing space. Thus vision doubles. There is the vision upon which I reflect; I cannot think it except *as* thought, the mind’s inspection, judgment, a reading of signs. And then there is the vision that actually occurs, an honorary or established thought, collapsed into a body – its own body, of which we can have no idea except in the exercise of it, and which introduces, between space and thought, the autonomous order of the composite of soul and body. The enigma of vision is not done away with; it is shifted from the “thought of seeing” to vision in act. (EM, 136)

A difficulty in understanding Merleau-Ponty’s concepts is that his descriptions must be interpreted visually, as a layering of concepts, rather than as a succession of hierarchical ideas. The triad of “self, others, things,” is not dominated by the self as a major triad in music is dominated by the tonic note. It is a cyclical structure, where movement occurs between three points that are nodes for many modalities of experience. Nevertheless, it is difficult to move philosophically from the “originary lived world” to the cultural world without more explication of Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

5 The Cultural World: “Ideas without Equivalents”

Merleau-Ponty’s later essays on painting delve into the connection between the “originary lived world” of experience and the cultural world. Michael B. Smith proposes that these essays trace out a “coherent theory of aesthetics” that leads Merleau-Ponty back to his initial reflections on perception and ahead to an “indirect ontology” and a “reformed idea of truth.”¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty proposes a hermeneutic in which a gap or lacuna (*un écart*) is retained between mind and things. In this gap, “wild being” exists, resistant to the mind’s totalizing grasp. Language, art, and music all work with this gap, pointing beyond themselves with transcendent radiance.

Perception and expression come into their own in this aesthetic, which unites the exterior and interior worlds of the artist and society in a mutually interpretative existence. The body is understood as a gesture, a grasp, a purchase upon the world, not as a passive receptor of the world or a dominating shaper of the world. It is constituted by space and time, by its physical attributes, and by its social and historical environments. It is understood as one’s own body (*le corps propre*) and experience is constituted by this body in an ever-moving, projective motion.

5.1 Language

For those who would interpret Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body as a source of sensation rather than perception, his comments on language as the gesture of the “speaking subject” should serve as a cautionary tale. Language is not separate from the body, for the body speaks from a fund of common experience, entirely and tirelessly engaged in signifying the world: “The word is a gesture, and its meaning a world” (PP, 184). Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the ideality of language, but says it must be

¹⁰ Michael B. Smith, “Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics,” in Johnson and Smith, 192.

recognized as an ideality and not reified.¹¹ As Smith points out, “The intent here is not to renounce all reflection, but to make it sufficiently aware of its own operations to put it in touch with its origins; nor to abjure reason, but to bring it down to earth.”¹²

Language is the first cultural acquisition and expression of human beings. Babies are continually addressed, face-to-face, in a dyad of parent and child; and the vehicle of the dialogue is linguistic gesture. The earliest contact between newborn and parent involves touch and gaze.¹³ Merleau-Ponty knew this well, for he held the Jean Piaget chair at the Sorbonne and conducted research in child development. He was well versed in new research into linguistic acquisition in children, which entered his phenomenology in a particularly rich way. For him, the body “sings” the world, for the body is infused with cognition, constituting and constituted by time, space, and others:

We would find that the words, vowels, phonemes are just as much ways of singing the world and that they are destined to represent objects not, as one believes with the naïve theory of onomatopoeia, by reason of an objective resemblance, but rather, because they extract from it and in the proper sense of the word express the emotional essence of it. (PP, 217)

The concept of expression developed by Merleau-Ponty with respect to language resists the notion that speech acts bring the mind to bear upon things in a univocal way. Rather, things are multivalent and speech opens thinking to this world of being and beings in an ambiguous way. Speech is an ideality that requires a hermeneutic. It is not transparent, but is a “body” or “emblem” that retains a gap or ambiguity in singing the world. Speech does not translate or clothe thought but becomes active thought in the world. Françoise Dastur links Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *la parole* more closely with

¹¹ “Let us say only that pure ideality is itself not without flesh nor freed from horizon structures: it lives of them, though they be another flesh and other horizons. It is as though the visibility animating the sensible world were to emigrate, not outside of every body, but into a different, lighter, more transparent one, as though it were to change flesh, abandoning that of the body for that of language and were thereby emancipated, but not freed from all conditionality” (Merleau-Ponty, VI, 153, quoted in Smith, “Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics,” 196.

¹² Smith, 198.

¹³ Gill, 97.

Humboldt's notion of *Sprache* than with Saussure's *analysis*.¹⁴ For Merleau-Ponty, language is one of the uses of the body as gesture, and not the translation of a verbal image, nor the use of a "pre-established neural network" (PP, 210). Use of the body is therefore inherently symbolic and signification is part of this symbolic symbiosis. The use of the body itself involves the creative birth of metaphor in speech as symbolic signification.

5.2 Painting

Salient aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on expression appear in his later work on painting. For Merleau-Ponty the research into narrative structures undertaken by Ricoeur is peripheral to his focus on an ontological theory of expression and his development of concepts such as "flesh," "chiasm," and "alterity." Galen Johnson notes that Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Klee in particular was "instrumental in [his] shift from a phenomenological aesthetics of gesture to an ontological aesthetics of genesis."¹⁵ An ontological aesthetics of genesis is an ontology of *advent*. Art forms are acts of incarnate freedom involving the whole being. Metaphoric function is intrinsic to this aesthetic genesis.

According to Jacques Taminiaux, Merleau-Ponty is always offering an implicit and explicit critique of Cartesian dualism in his writings on painting and of Heidegger's notion of being that proposes Being as yet another ideality.¹⁶ For him, painters such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Klee bear witness to "the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body – not that possible body which

¹⁴ Françoise Dastur, "The Body of Speech," in *Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy: Transforming the Tradition*, ed. Bernard Flynn, Wayne J. Froman, and Robert Vallier (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 257–73.

¹⁵ Galen A. Johnson, "Thinking in Color: Merleau-Ponty and Paul Klee," in *Merleau-Ponty: Difference, Materiality, Painting*, ed. Véronique Foti (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 170.

¹⁶ Jacques Taminiaux, "On the 'Fundamental of Painting,'" in Flynn, Froman, and Vallier, *Merleau-Ponty and the Possibilities of Philosophy*, 221–35.

we may legitimately think of as an information machine but that actual body I call mine" (EM, 160). Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that the world is there for us as an object of instrumental reason. Instead, the house of the body is the moving tent pitched in the habitat of the world.

Painting does not reveal copies or shadows of truth. It does not designate truth as a correspondence between image and thing but makes a space for meaning with colour, line, form, and the work of the artist within the context of her tradition and social milieu. Thus painting shows "ideas without equivalents." The act of expression is the genesis of meaning: this is the metaphoric function at work. Merleau-Ponty applies this essentially linguistic function to the visual world of painting.

Metaphoric function is an embodied process for Merleau-Ponty. Truth is constituted through embodiment, not displaced by it. It is not a singular individual truth, accessible only to the artist; rather, it is an intersubjective truth. Rather than Heidegger's "lighted clearing," the human is an incarnate, perceiving subject, entwined with the flesh of the world. The act of expression creates the world of the work and the world of the maker, and reconfigures the world for others:

The perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth . . . like a new language; we do not know what works it will accomplish but only that, once it has appeared, it cannot fail to say little or much, to have a history and a meaning. The very productivity or freedom of human life, far from denying our situation, utilizes it and turns it into a means of expression.¹⁷

Expression – genesis of meaning and metaphoric function at work – is an incarnational act, among others who are also incarnate. The body appears and is born, but natality – coming to birth – is ongoing.

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text," in *Truth Engagements Across Philosophical Traditions*, ed. José Medina and David Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 199.

Chapter 3: Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty – Narrative Actualization, Thinking Expression

But all that confronts us is the world, gesturing at us. The world has patterns, of which our thinking is a part. It makes us feel good to experience these patterns: it is one way of coming home.

—Jan Zwicky, *Wisdom and Metaphor*

Metaphor, whether verbal or nonverbal, preserves and conserves human action, and opens up tradition to new meanings. It is a temporal act, for each new metaphoric utterance – broadly understood – is successive yet simultaneous, a palimpsest underlying our current projects and understandings. Both Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty offer a concept of “ideas without equivalents” as transcendent meaning that emerges from the world of people and things.

My project as an artist is what I see as a Ricoeurian refiguration of the world. I bring my entire being to the project and my body is involved in the work, constituting my practice in ways that Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression elucidates. I find the notion of sedimented meaning useful in bringing understanding to the role of tradition and lineage in the genesis of my own work and in that of other painters. As a practising artist, the intersection of Ricoeur’s and Merleau-Ponty’s thought regarding theories of metaphor and metaphoric expression guides my understanding of artistic projects, modern and postmodern.

Merleau-Ponty insists on a hermeneutic that includes the artist, the work, and the “living imbrication” of the artist within his or her life and culture, as the ontological opening for artistic investigation. For him, truth is constituted by embodied, situated experience, rather than by the mind as it abstracts and reduces multivalent modes of experience. Polarities of sense and non-sense are balanced by metaphor, making new meaning and refiguring the world. Cultural, physical, environmental, and historical contexts shape all aspects of this refiguration, whether verbal or nonverbal.

Ricoeur’s analysis of meaning and creativity, which focused on language, can be read in tandem with Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression to extend the idea of metaphor and communication into the nonverbal sphere. What art does in the world is always

brought to language for discussion. For Ricoeur, the preverbal experiential iconic moment is preserved in language (indeed supports language) despite its nonmaterial abstraction. Therefore, through language, as well as image, art enters history. A temporal dimension is found in nonverbal art as it is brought to language and then incorporated within tradition.

For example, works of art become part of our vocabulary, and we learn to see by them. Edward Hopper's paintings show isolated figures haunting the diners and bars of late-night cityscapes, refiguring those wastelands, teaching us to read alienation, love, and loss – "ideas without equivalents" – in them.¹ Agnes Martin's spare pencil drawings evoke eternity in their visual presentation of repeated yet varied linear patterns. The mark of her hand is visible, undercutting the mechanical appearance of the work.²

In both of these examples, the world has been grasped by an artist, responded to, and refigured according to an individual gesture, for interpretation by a viewer. As viewers we grasp the work and embody its meaning in our imaginations. They create a narrative that enters our self-narrative both intellectually and viscerally. We may feel the gestural markings made by the artist in our own physique; their spatial dimensions become interior spaces, an architecture of the mind. Visual works can become emblems of time and place enlarging our experience of places and situations we have not personally visited. The world of the work gives us a revelation.

The philosophies of Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty insist on the value of art in the broadest sense, for art is an arena of the "I can," where human beings reveal the world to themselves, the world to each other, and alter the existing world for others who will come later. Merleau-Ponty identifies a "return to the speaking subject" in Cézanne's work as a painter. He notices the process of meditation and gesture revealed in

¹ Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/H/hopper/nighthwk.jpg.html> (accessed June 30, 2010).

² Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, <http://contemporaryartsem.wordpress.com/2008/12/27/modern-painters/untitled-79-pencil-ink-on-paper-105-x-105-in/> (accessed June 30, 2010).

Cézanne's paintings, in writings on his painting, and in correspondence with his friends, and he interprets all these strands together. His hermeneutic does not collapse the distinction between artist and work but investigates the dialogue between them, interpreting both dialectically rather than mapping the work onto the artist's life as a form of extended biography.

1 Metaphor and Expression

1.1 Emergent Meaning and Natality

Ricoeur's theory of metaphor sees texts as arenas for polarities requiring hermeneutic interpretation. Metaphor takes place in discourse, which is understood as textual and where "emergent meaning" takes place. In written language, the world of the work, evoked by its fictional events, things, states of affairs, and characters, offers "possible modes of being, of symbolic dimensions of our being-in-the-world."³ Thus, in Ricoeur we find the triad of author, reader, and text, with understanding as the process uniting all three: "Beyond my situation as reader, beyond the author's situation, I offer myself to the possible ways of being-in-the-world which the text opens up and discovers for me."⁴

In Merleau-Ponty, the theory of expression refers to a comparable process of metaphorical utterance, articulated with a primary focus on painting. Merleau-Ponty's theory traces the advent of emergent meaning in the world, specifically in the domain of painting via the body of the painter. The painter is a maker of symbolic meaning that radiates beyond the visual work to a world of meaning that is transcendent but not transcendental. The painter does not record images that resemble the visible world but remakes them according to the painter's living response. For both thinkers, resemblance

³ Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," in RR, 313-14.

⁴ Ricoeur, "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," in RR, 313-14.

is a component but not the goal of metaphorical utterance in texts or paintings. For them, representation reduces meaning rather than amplifying it.

Merleau-Ponty shares Ricoeur's insistence on a multivalent signification of the word that is responsive to the irreducible experience of the world:

[T]he univocal signification is but one part of the signification of the word. . . . [B]eyond it there is always a halo of signification that manifests itself in new and unexpected modes of use. . . . [T]here is an operation of language upon language, which . . . would launch language back into a new history, and makes of the word-meaning itself an enigma. (VI, 96)

The intersections of world, painter, and work forge a return to world in a continuously cyclic motion. In this interplay, emergent meaning has its advent through embodied experience:

Art is not construction, artifice, the meticulous relationship to a space and a world existing outside. . . . When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections there; I see it through them and because of them. . . . [T]his inner animation, this radiation of the visible, is what the painter seeks beneath, the words *depth, space, and color*. (EM, 142)

Merleau-Ponty focuses on certain modern painters whose work he admires because they are bringing about new systems of equivalences. These often shocking equivalences propel new meaning:

The effort of modern painting has been directed not so much toward choosing between line and color, or even between figurative depiction and the creation of signs, as it has been toward multiplying the systems of equivalences, toward severing their adherence to the envelope of things. This effort may require the creation of new materials or new means of expression, but it may well be realized at times by the reexamination and reuse of those already at hand. (EM, 142)

The notion of "multiplying the systems of equivalences" seems to accord well with Ricoeur's concept of "semantic impertinence." Expression pushes beyond sedimented traditions, in language or in painting, to birth new metaphorical truths.

For Merleau-Ponty this "system of equivalences" is part of an artist's style, "a shaping of the elements of the world, allowing it to be oriented toward one of its essential parts.

Meaning arrives when we submit the data of the world to a “coherent deformation” (ILVS, 91). “Coherent deformation” accords well with Ricoeur’s idea of “semantic impertinence,” which inaugurates meaning out of the ruins of previous sense and in which language is an experienced domain of signification that unites self, others, and the world, via discourse. Merleau-Ponty quotes Ricoeur’s term *advent* to explain cultural meaning as an inauguration:

We propose on the contrary to consider the order of culture or meaning an original order of *advent*. . . . If it is characteristic of the human gesture to signify beyond its simple existence in fact, to inaugurate a meaning it follows that every gesture is *comparable* to every other. They all arise from a single syntax. Each is both a beginning and a continuation which, insofar as it is not walled up in its singularity and finished once and for all like an event, points to a continuation or recommencement. Its value exceeds its simple presence, and in this respect it is allied or implicated in advance with all other efforts of expression. (ILVS, 105)

Expression points beyond given meaning, gathering it up and projecting it outwards—“language aims beyond itself,” says Ricoeur. For Merleau-Ponty, expression signifies beyond the level of univocal or even multivocal meaning, because it is a transaction between human and other living beings:

What we mean is not before us, outside all speech, as sheer signification, it is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said. With our apparatus of expression we set ourselves up in a situation the apparatus is sensitive to, we confront it with the situation, and our statements are only the final balance of these exchanges.⁵

Merleau-Ponty positions the work of art in a complex matrix of social, historical, political, and cultural forces: “The significance which the work has in excess of the painter’s intended meaning involves it in a multitude of relationships which are only faintly reflected in short histories of painting and even in psychological studies of the painter” (ILVS, 105).

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 83, quoted in Gill, *Merleau-Ponty and Metaphor*, 85.

Merleau-Ponty joins expression and communication, unlike Kant, who sees them as polarities.⁶ In the Kantian model, according to Lambert Zuidervaart, a judging subject perceives an object, which evokes the free harmonious play of understanding. Expression, the work of genius, gives way to taste, which judges according to “common sense.” Common sense grounds the expression of genius and makes the work accessible, but that judgement is not a source of “any significant knowledge” (AT, 60). Pairing expression and communication, rather than opposing them as limits upon each other, opens possibilities for “significant knowledge” with respect to art.

Yoking expression and communication necessarily places artists and their work within the world of self, others, and things. Artworks do not manifest truth but inaugurate a possibility of it. They gather up sedimented meanings from the artist’s society and the artist’s own experience, and communicate them in a new gesture, adding a layer of meaning to the symbols of the world. Those who receive and appropriate the work are partners in the communicative aspect of expression, and are the *life* of the work.

Ricoeur also pairs expression and communication, developing a reciprocity between them into an aesthetic ontology in which individuals open to each other and their shared and disparate histories. Meaning is emergent and “apodictic certainty, consciousness as representation, and knowledge as correspondence are set aside in favor of the chronicle which emerges from our ability to coherently connect – and thus imbue with meaning – otherwise heterogeneous and disparate events.”⁷

Time is the thread of narrative and narrative’s logic is based on sequence. Narrative has a beginning, middle, and end. Painting is apparently grasped in a glance or two, and therefore appears to lack the experience of duration that is a dominant feature of music, drama, and reading. This old philosophical problem was first posed in Lessing’s

⁶ The following summary follows Lambert Zuidervaart’s outline in AT, chap. 3.

⁷ Mark S. Muldoon, *Tricks of Time: Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur in Search of Time, Self and Meaning* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 237.

Laocoön, in 1766.⁸ Ricoeur proposes that the self is constructed throughout time through reading and the experience of narrative. For Merleau-Ponty, viewing a painter's work reconstitutes the self. For him the term *natalité* becomes prominent. This concept of genesis or birthing can be extended to artworks such as Matisse's, which require the viewer to constitute the known through what one might call a process of "refiguration":

First, the painter may, like Klee, decide to hold rigorously to the principle of the genesis of the visible, the principle of fundamental, indirect, or . . . as Klee used to say . . . absolute painting, and then leave it up to the title to designate by its prosaic name the entity thus constituted, in order to leave the painting free to function more purely as a painting. Or alternatively he may undertake, with Matisse . . . , to put into a single line both the prosaic, identifying characteristics of the entity and the hidden operation which combines such indolence or inertia and such force in it as are required to constitute it as *nude*, as *face*, as *flower*. (EM, 144)

Time enters the experience of static visual art works such as painting and sculpture through the viewer's constitution of the work, which is required to complete the work.

1.2 Narrative Time and Constitution of the Self

Self is constituted by the phenomenology of reading: a fusion of the horizons of the imaginative experience of the work and the lived experience of the reader. Narrative time in the world of the work refigures human time, giving it shape and coherence. Ricoeur sees the metaphorical process at work in fiction and history equally, although for him the truth claims for history are never those of absolute causality but rather of analogy, with the intention of bearing witness to the dead (TN₃, 143).

Mark S. Muldoon notices the close approximation of Merleau-Ponty's implicit topic of narrative identity to its explicit formulation in Ricoeur.⁹ He approaches the intersection of the ideas of both men through a thematic investigation of time, a vital dimension of

⁸ See Jeoraldean McClain, "Time in the Visual Arts: Lessing and Modern Criticism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44, no. 1 (Autumn 1985), 41-58.

⁹ See Mark S. Muldoon, *Tricks of Time*. Muldoon is one of only a few authors who have studied Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty in relation to each other.

the work of the metaphoric imagination. With narrative time, metaphoric imagination constructs a new invention and gives authentic voice to individuals who are always newly positioned in the world. Merleau-Ponty calls this new invention “style,” referring not to an aesthetic but to an ontological “original relation to the world” (PW, 56). Merleau-Ponty recognizes the narrative of self in the ontological relation to the world. On my reading, self-construction can occur through the work of metaphoric imagination revealed in nonverbal symbolic forms such as painting. In Ricoeur, the narrative of self is primarily constructed in the context of reading texts but it is similarly an ontological relation. Narrative is time-based because it arises from life which we enter and leave without volition. Muldoon connects narrative and Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, since one may, by means of metaphor, become alive to the prelinguistic “narrative” in visual works. Ricoeur acknowledges the trace of the prelinguistic in metaphor while Merleau-Ponty is interested in the function of the prelinguistic in art. Muldoon points out that

[t]he hermeneutical ground of the philosophical act is the prephilosophical experience. It starts with the questions that existence evokes. It reflects on the answers that have been given in a prephilosophical manner to these questions.¹⁰

Muldoon sees the treatment of time as an ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty and as an aporia that is bridged by narrative in Ricoeur. For him, Ricoeur presents a self that is engaged in a “conflict of interpretations,” which are held in tension through hermeneutic interpretation and metaphorical utterance. I see a convergence between Merleau-Ponty, who calls for an excess of signification in language (a “halo of signification”) and Ricoeur, who describes story as an “imaginative variation” that grants an understanding positioned between “the pseudo-alternatives of pure change and absolute identity.”¹¹

¹⁰ Muldoon, *Tricks of Time*, 233.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, RR, quoted in Muldoon, *Tricks of Time*, 222.

Unfortunately, Muldoon seems to draw primarily on Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* as the basis for his analysis of convergences and divergences from Ricoeur. For example, Muldoon sees an ambiguous, bifurcated self in the phenomenal present in Merleau-Ponty.¹² This seems to me to ignore the writer of *Eye and Mind*, *Signs*, and *The Prose of the World*. Muldoon's analysis of a bifurcated self in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy seems to be a misreading of Merleau-Ponty's description of the phenomenal body, which transforms in Merleau-Ponty's later works to become a philosophy of "flesh," a difficult concept that is never a concept of phenomenal sensation and in no way allows for a bifurcated self.¹³ Reversibility is not a bifurcation but the warp and weft of the same piece of cloth. The painter does not oppose sensation and creation, but brings her body with her to the work and the work "has the strange power of being self-teaching" (EM, 70; cf. also PP, 179).

1.3 Aesthetic Ontology

Metaphor in Ricoeur and expression in Merleau-Ponty bring new life to language and art. As demonstrated in the quotations above, both thinkers acknowledge the given world as a social and historical construction. The prephilosophical ground of the given world is constituted by human beings into a developed, expressive construction that amplifies human experience on both individual and societal levels, in projects such as art- and law-making, writing, and education. These endure as traces for succeeding generations.

¹² Muldoon sees ambiguity at the level of embodiment. He sees the phenomenal body as prepersonal, though personal at the incarnate level. He retains a dualism here that is not borne out in Merleau-Ponty. He sees an aporia in Ricoeur, in that tension exists between "cosmic time and mortal time, and human action in general as understood both historically and culturally. The present for Merleau-Ponty is framed within a perceptual field while the present of Ricoeur is framed within a story or a history" (Muldoon, *Tricks of Time*, 243–45).

¹³ Hass points out three uses of "flesh" in Merleau-Ponty's essay, *VI*, which will be used here: flesh as *carnality*, in a bodily sense; flesh as *reversibility*, not as matter but as process of vision and touch intertwined in active constitution of meaning in the world; and flesh as an *element* of being as a sort of "incarnate principle" (Lawrence Hass, "The Multiple Meanings of *Flesh* in Merleau-Ponty's Late Writings," in Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 201–3).

Both Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty work from phenomenological premises that lead to an aesthetic ontology where “cultural ideas without equivalents” say more than supposedly objective epistemological truths. In fact, they bring forth new meaning about the beingness of beings. For both thinkers, the realm of art is a human domain for ontological explanation, understanding, and truth making:

Not that there is behind language a transcendent thought, but that language transcends itself in speech, that speech itself brings about that concordance between me and myself, and between myself and other, on which an attempt is being made to base that thought. . . . To give expression is not to substitute, for new thought, a system of stable signs to which unchangeable thoughts are linked, it is to ensure, by the use of words already used, that the new intention carries on the heritage of the past, it is at a stroke to incorporate the past into the present and weld that present to a future, to open a whole temporal cycle in which the “acquired” thought will remain present as a dimension. (PP, 392)

Language arises and transforms life but is not beyond living experience in some absolute manner. Therefore the goal is not transcendental thought, but rather the interpretation of self, in one’s insertion into a pre-existing world with other beings.

The purpose of metaphorical utterance goes beyond the imaginative decoration of text or visual ornament. The purpose of metaphor is a Ricoeurian “refiguration” of social and individual conditions towards “better or worse” life-giving orientations (to use Zuidervart’s terminology). In taking up the task of symbolic expression or metaphorical utterance, human beings have the opportunity to imagine possible worlds and to remake the already given world in the light of these refigured possibilities. Thus, determining “better or worse” life-giving orientations necessarily involves history, memory, and time on both the individual and societal levels. History is not a realm of certainty that reproduces events, persons, or ideas in any accurate way. Looking back is a configuring, refiguring, imaginative act. Looking forward to better possibilities in hope is an imaginative act. History is a fictive account of real events, a reweaving, a collage of experiences that we understand through trace, the mark of an absent person in the present time. For some philosophers the contingency of trace and the awareness of erasure make the entire notion of history suspect and merely contingent. Ricoeur’s theory of narrative subsumes the process of metaphorical utterance in a philosophy of

hope. Trace is a bearer of witness to embodied existence but that trace, shown in texts, monuments, and art, requires a hermeneutic for understanding. There may be “better or worse” understandings but we can all walk in the light. Metaphoric function is a work in refiguring our interpretation of history in order to re-imagine the future. Past, present, and future are not determined but are available for re-invention.

2 Fiction and History: Trace, Erasure, Signature, Style

Humans are meaning makers and Ricoeur sees a process of meaning refiguration in both fiction and nonfiction; he delineates a “symmetry between fictional narrative and historical narrative based on the universal character of narrative configuration.”¹⁴ Ricoeur’s thesis, that our embedded lives are a “living imbrication” (TN₁, 75), underlies notions such as trace, erasure, and signature. These notions have been taken up as contingencies by many postmodern philosophers, in order to restrict the notion of seeing and saying in verbal and nonverbal works – “micrologies that babble, huff and puff, and are envious of one another.”¹⁵ For philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Derrida, contingency is of primary importance in existence, and much postmodern art draws on their philosophies of suspicion.¹⁶ For Ricoeur, trace, erasure, and signature are elements of witness by living beings. The history of these lives needs sensitive interpretation, not a reading that considers living beings as merely contingent accidents of history.

Although Ricoeur takes up concepts from poststructural analyses, his treatment of these ideas is ultimately quite different. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty sees “the experiential field [as] a largely happy place.”¹⁷ Both philosophers see meaning making as a positive

¹⁴ Muldoon, *Tricks of Time*, 200.

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, “Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity,” in Johnson and Smith, 333.

¹⁶ Muldoon, *On Ricoeur*, 73.

¹⁷ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, 93.

human task. Foucault takes Merleau-Ponty to task for this, as he sees humans not only as “imbricated” but as essentially coerced by oppressive social, historical, and cultural forces.¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s lack of treatment of postmodern themes such as “subjectivity, sexuality, gender, and race in living bodies” do constitute a lacuna.¹⁹ Nevertheless, his work on embodiment does not reduce human beings to coercive determinants of race, gender, and sexuality: his work can be extended to consider these issues, as many feminist scholars have done in the years following his death.²⁰

One might claim that the philosophers of suspicion deny the ontological aspect of aesthetic experience because aesthetic experience is not grounded in reference to the lifeworld for them but only exists within the realm of the aesthetic. Furthermore, it seems that an imagination that is coerced and determined by history, sex, gender, and race would then be doomed to repeating old formulas and reiterating old hegemonies of voice and vision. It could not produce new meaning within a free context. But Ricoeur has faith in the reader’s or viewer’s attempts to make new meaning. For him, the literary work makes a connection to the lifeworld through the reader, and the phenomenological premise of embodied subjectivity guarantees the reader’s positive integrity. Gaston Bachelard concurs with Ricoeur’s phenomenology of reading:

But every good book should be re-read as soon as it is finished. After the sketchiness of the first reading comes the creative work of reading. We must then know the problem that confronted the author. The second, then the third reading . . . give us, little by little, the solution of this problem. Imperceptibly, we give ourselves the illusion that both the problem and the solution are ours. The psychological nuance: “I should have written that,” establishes us as phenomenologists of reading.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., 92–99.

¹⁹ Ibid., 93.

²⁰ See Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C Gill, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Dorothea Olkowski, *Feminist Interpretations of Merleau-Ponty* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006).

²¹ Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 21.

3 Truth in Fiction: The Constructed Self and Others

Merleau-Ponty's *expression* and Ricoeur's *metaphor* work to bring living experience to meaning acts in art and text, nonverbal and verbal works. Both thinkers share the phenomenological premise that living experience is the beginning and that meaning arises from this embodied existence. To doubt the validity of the enterprise of human meaning-making is to doubt our own potential for hope and positive growth.

However, for some philosophers self-doubt is endemic; no one is worthy of trust, not even one's own being. The decentred self, prey to illusion and *vanitas*, is found in the strain of philosophy that stretches from Nietzsche to Derrida. Mario J. Valdés discusses the contrast between Ricoeur and Derrida in terms that highlight their similarities, yet point to the profound difference between a philosophy of doubt and one that finds truth in fiction. Derrida and Ricoeur – and indeed Merleau-Ponty also – are poststructuralist philosophers who reject “interpretive absolutisms” by virtue of the polysemic nature of language: “since there is no absolute origin, culture is a continuing chain of iterations and reiterations” for Derrida and Ricoeur, says Valdés (RR, 24). For Derrida this chain of iteration and reiteration results in absolute indeterminacy. Indeterminacy is inescapably endemic to the text for him – but not for Ricoeur.

For Ricoeur, meaning is possible and is of vital importance. The work of metaphor is more than merely shaping congruence or analogy; it connects reader and text, creating new meaning within the reader and the world. Shared meaning is constructed communally. Neither “historicist absolutism” nor “the deferral of deconstruction” prevails.

3.1 Shared Premise: Divergent Outcomes

Merleau-Ponty's affirmative phenomenological premise is fundamental in Ricoeur, but, despite the shared beginning, there is a fundamental difference between Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur: Merleau-Ponty initially investigated the body, *le corps propre* (the natural

subject), to elucidate the body's situation in the world, whereas Ricoeur began with the problematic of evil, of human behaviour within the world. Ricoeur studies the cultural ideas that shape human thinking, imagination, and action. He is driven to examine symbols, to "graft hermeneutics onto phenomenology . . . because of the epistemological status of the meditation on evil will."²² Merleau-Ponty seeks a fundamental ontological reorientation of the phenomenal body within the world, an embodied epistemology.

Ricoeur initially compared Merleau-Ponty's ideas in *The Phenomenology of Perception* with Heidegger's notion of care and being-in-the-world, and acknowledges a further development in (and debt to) Merleau-Ponty's concept of *reversibility*, revealed in "The Visible and the Invisible."²³

3.1.1 Reversibility

Merleau-Ponty's embodied or substantial knowing links perception and cognition as one interwoven texture in and of the world. This texture weaves the visible and invisible as two sides of one fabric. Lawrence Hass contrasts this notion with the Platonic division of the visible and the invisible, In the Platonic perspective, a visible perception of things as shadows, reflections, and illusions is contrasted with an invisible ideality that consists of knowledge, dialectic, and mathematics. By contrast, reversibility constitutes a hermeneutic circle that resists ideality.

In Hass's schema (shown in figure 1), Merleau-Ponty's development of the concepts of the visible and the invisible shows the symbiotic and synergistic interweaving of self, others, things, culture, and world. Ricoeur's emphasis on meaningful narrative can be thought to illuminate the aspect of the invisible that is named but not analyzed in detail by Merleau-Ponty.

²² Paul Ricoeur, "Intellectual Autobiography," in Hahn, 16.

²³ Ibid., 11-12.

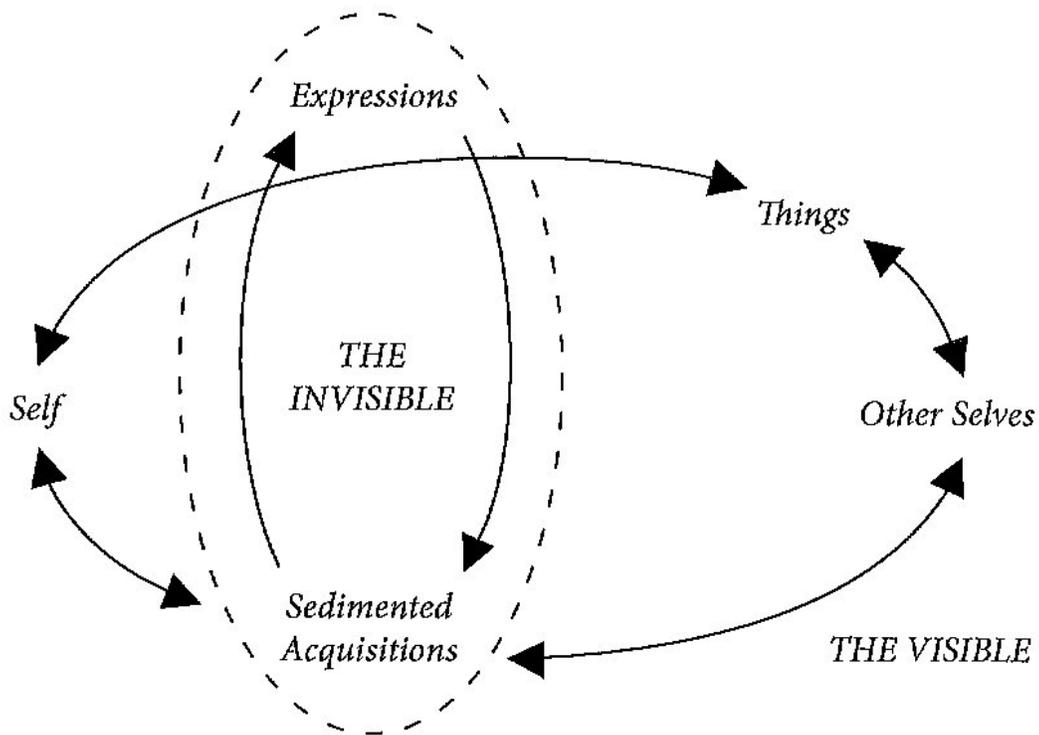


Figure 1. The visible and the invisible

Source: Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 196.

3.1.2 Sedimented Meaning

The notion of *sedimented meaning* appears in both philosophers, with different articulations. In Merleau-Ponty, the distinction given by Saussure between language as a stable system and contingent language as spoken by individuals is elided and language is understood as an "[i]nterwoven duality between constituted . . . and expressive language . . . a movement between the culturally and historically sedimented field of the already spoken word, and the expressive acts which transcend and transform it."²⁴ Though Merleau-Ponty does not analyze language in the domain of texts (written discourse available to memory and history), he does identify a process of

²⁴ Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 191.

expression in language that can be read as enriching Ricoeur's theory of metaphor and phenomenology of reading.

Both thinkers arrive at an aesthetic ontology: for art, whether verbal or nonverbal, says something about being in the world. Merleau-Ponty is particularly allergic to Heidegger; the valorization of authenticity in Heidegger amounts to a magnification of the individual cut loose from embodied existence and is, therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, an intellectual abstraction. He critiques Malraux's valorization of the individual artist who is "devoted to stubborn self-pleasure, to daemonic pleasure---that is, to the pleasure of all in humanity which destroys humanity" (ILVS, 88). By contrast, the artist's work does not exist in itself like a thing for Merleau-Ponty but "the work . . . invites [the viewer] to take up the gesture which created it and . . . to rejoin . . . the silent world of the painter, henceforth uttered and accessible" (ILVS, 88).

The viewer inhabits the work and is inhabited by it. We remember nonverbal works such as paintings, sculpture, and installation; we *see* by them; we *story* by narratives. Van Gogh painted peasant cottages that he thought of as nests in his mind's eye, his eye's ear. Commenting on this process, Bachelard writes:

For a painter, it is probably twice as interesting if, while painting a nest he dreams of a cottage and, while painting a cottage, he dreams of a nest. It is as though one dreamed twice, in two registers, when one dreams of an image cluster such as this. For the simplest image is doubled; it is itself and something else than itself.²⁵

Ricoeur's famously quotes the Portuguese storyteller quoted by Roman Jakobson who "marks" the poetic intention of tales by saying "Aixo era y no era" (it was and it was not; RM, 302). A doubling takes place, a friction, a collision or fracture of meaning in the contest between figuration, configuration, and refiguration. An advent of meaning occurs, the silent partner of art.

²⁵ Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 98.

A confluence of Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty hinges upon their shared perception that works of art – literary or visual – open up the world of the individual to interpretations of self, society, and history. This mediation is dynamic, as individuals inscribe their projects upon a world that was already there: already speaking, in voice and vision.

Chapter 4: Ethical Expression for Wider Worlds

Here I will briefly review Lambert Zuidervaart's theory of artistic truth and position it in several ways with respect to Merleau-Ponty's concept of expression and with less detail, Ricoeur's theory of metaphorical truth. First, reading Zuidervaart's notion of nonpropositional truth from the subject side in tandem with Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression expands the concept of metaphorical truth. Secondly, Zuidervaart's conception of artistic truth, both ethical and constitutive of social and political dimensions of human life, accords well with Ricoeur's notion of self as constructed through the phenomenology of reading leading to action in the lifeworld. Finally, his argument for artistic truth encompasses many fields of human enterprise where imaginative disclosure is at work, showing the possibility of a genesis of hope.

My own artistic practice, as painter and poet, is the source of my interest in artistic truth. As a practicing artist in search of a critical apparatus that might allow insight into my own creative processes as well as those of other postmodern artists, Zuidervaart's discussion expands upon the work of Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty in compelling ways for the arts community by reasserting art's ethical function. Zuidervaart's concept of imaginative disclosure with an emphasis on the social capacities of expression has many resonances with the theories of expression of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the incarnation of the subject is helpful in articulating dialogue with my own working process. Ricoeur's theory of metaphorical truth adds to my interpretation and evaluation of linguistically tuned postmodern art. Zuidervaart's social and global perspectives widen my horizons and challenge my commitment to human and nonhuman subjects in making aesthetic signs that matter.

1 Zuidervaart's Concept of Disclosure: Site, Opening, Genesis

Zuidervaart develops his concept of artistic truth through the lineage of Heidegger, Adorno, Habermas, and Gadamer, and in tension with the Anglo-American theorists I. A. Richards, Monroe Beardsley, and Nelson Goodman. Zuidervaart's emerging theory of truth is both dialogical and dialectical: dialogical in that it occurs in concert with

other perspectives and traditions, and dialectical in that it incorporates a circularity – almost an oscillation between polarities – which will be examined later.

Zuidervaart retains the idea of the human being as a site of disclosure, with an ontological emphasis via Heidegger but without Heidegger's imprecision as to whether human beings are disclosing better or worse practices and ideas for the flourishing of human and nonhuman life (AT, 107). Disclosure and discovery surface as tensions in Zuidervaart's conception of artistic truth in contemporary western society (AT, 55–68). He emphasizes the aspect of play as exploration. If play is fundamental to human endeavours, whether artistic or scientific, then its characteristic mode of operating – exploration – can be encouraged. Exploration becomes a vital way of being in the world and of intersubjective living and making in the aesthetic and technoscientific realms.

Zuidervaart's claim is crucial, for it liberates exploration – an aspect of imagination – from the ghetto of art, rendering it active in all “intersubjective processes.” The great divide of art and science is crossed while the stakes are raised for both. Art cannot retreat into an isolated position, playing games that lack significance in the lifeworld; and science can recognize its own sources and act within a notion of shared processes of imagination. Creative interpretation and presentation pair with exploration in making up imagination (AT, 61). Zuidervaart frames imagination as “referring to intersubjective processes rather than to a mental capacity, and as involving aesthetic signs rather than mental contents” (AT, 62). This is in opposition to the widespread romantic and modern notion of the imagination as something internal, inspired (divinely or artistically), individual, and hard to evaluate or justify. Recasting imagination as a process involving aesthetic signs rather than internal mental contents renders it available for evaluation.

2 Intersubjective Processes: Mending the Fence between Art and Science

When describing imagination as a process involving aesthetic signs, Zuidervaart prefers to use the term *intersubjective* rather than *human* because his term includes the biotic and human worlds, and applies equally to artistic and technoscientific projects. Zuidervaart says that “intersubjective imaginative processes within the arts both complement and

disrupt other societally constituted sites in which cultural orientation occurs and validity claims arise and get tested. The modern sciences are one such site" (AT, 215). In his view, this process of disruption is not antiaesthetic. Further, it is susceptible to evaluation by markers such as complexity, depth, and intensity (AT, 64) as part of a horizon of imaginative cogency rather than rules or principles (AT, 65). The process of disruption, rather than being transgressive or merely deconstructive, is vital to utopian and critical hope for life flourishing in human practices (AT, 108). Human practices are attempts at pathfinding and cultural orientation rather than efforts to produce art objects cut off from other human fields.¹ Likewise, scientific practices are attempts at cultural orientation rather than efforts merely to produce scientific objects or practices cut off from the flourishing of humans and nonhumans. Neither art for art's sake nor science for science's sake should prevail. Aesthetic signs and cultural orientation are significant in technoscientific endeavours as well as in the art world.

Zuidervaart's concept of imagination is key to bringing together art and science and demanding truth-finding practices from both. Art is transversed by many intersubjective processes, with imagination in the lead. Imagination includes exploration, interpretation, and presentation. Zuidervaart frames imagination as a set of polarities in a dialectic, reinterpreted from Kant's distinctions (between work and play, instruction and entertainment, communication and expression), which keeps the aesthetic within the "ordinary as an indispensable ingredient for human flourishing under contemporary conditions" (AT, 59). By *contemporary conditions*, Zuidervaart is referring philosophically to "a postmetaphysical paradigm in contemporary philosophy" and artistically to postmodernism in the arts (AT, 1).

¹ Crowther, "The Postmodern Iterable," 204-6. In a similar fashion Crowther describes the colonization of the world through the media and representation in the realm he calls the "hyperreal." Signs need anchorage in the real in order to make evaluation of better or worse messages and representations. Art products require anchorage in the real to have import and ethical value.

3 Imaginative Disclosure: Expression, Presentation, Import

Zuidervaart's conception of artistic truth crosses the divide between expression and communication enunciated by Kant. Zuidervaart proposes a threefold concept of "imaginative disclosure." As outlined by Zuidervaart, expression and communication are spoken of as genius and taste in Kant. According to Kant, the artist expresses "aesthetic ideas" that are taken up by the "common sense" as a matter of taste so that such "feeling-laden and creative intuitions [are made] publicly accessible or "universally communicable."²

By contrast, Zuidervaart pairs expression and communication as elements of *imaginative disclosure*, a concept which is made up of "mediated expression, interpretable presentation, and configured import." Artistic truth is thus a dialectical, dialogical process that cannot reside, merely or exclusively, in either the expressive intentions of an artist, or in any autonomous meaning in the art work (AT, 127). Works cannot be canonized in society, and their meaning fossilized, since interpretation is never finished with respect to an art practice or product. Expression takes on a new meaning in a twentieth-century "linguistically turned" philosophy (AT, 2).

Mediated expression becomes part of Zuidervaart's concept of imaginative disclosure, operative in the production of art works (AT, 127). Mediation occurs between an artist and her materials, and through the artist's and the artwork's engagement with society. Temporality, rather than eternal universals, situates the artist. History mediates the artist's selection of media and method as well as the dialogue of reception of her work. History also influences the significance accorded art practices. Artists working out the significance of art received from the past may re-evaluate and recontextualize art phenomena.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 49, 195, quoted in AT, 59.

4 Dimensions of Artistic Truth: “A Promised Land But Not an Occupied One”

For Zuidervaart, disclosure is not sufficient for artistic truth. Human beings can contest the meaning of imaginative disclosure according to principles of aesthetic validity.

Zuidervaart distinguishes between three aspects of imaginative disclosure to help steer a course between Heidegger’s ontological conception of truth (where both truth and untruth are unveiled in beings and Being) and Jurgen Habermas’ notion of truth as “communicative action” (AT, 101). According to Zuidervaart, neither of these positions, antipropositional and propositional (AT, 204), provide a conception of artistic truth or truth in general. In Heidegger we cannot “distinguish true disclosure from false,” and Habermas restricts the dimension of truth to one form of communication “even though he considers the other dimensions analogous to truth” (AT, 101). Zuidervaart charts his argument through Heidegger’s ontological conception of truth and Adorno’s focus on “import” (AT, 123) to arrive at “three dimensions of artistic truth with the terms authenticity (*vis à vis* the artist’s intentions), significance (*vis-à-vis* the audience’s interpretive needs), and integrity (*vis à vis* the work’s internal demands)” (AT, 127).

These three dimensions of artistic truth are, in Zuidervaart’s view, relationships, not criteria, within which art phenomena may be true. Because the measure of truth for human being is “life-promoting and life-sustaining fidelity to principles that they hold in common and that hold them in common” (AT, 100), artistic truth must take its place as part of a general conception of truth. Thus, the dynamic and historical nature of these relationships is bound to a central concept of the flourishing of life flourishing.

Cultural orientation unfolds historically, within societies and individuals, and can be discussed, contested, and changed. Science and art are both subject to this pathfinding process and may look to the same north star of aesthetic validity guided by the central dynamic correlation between human fidelity to societal principle and a life-giving disclosure of society (AT, 9). Zuidervaart carefully undoes the elision of disclosure and validity in Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” and shows that disclosure, though one of the aspects of art and science, does not answer questions of validity. Art

is not privileged as the site of antipropositional disclosure, nor is science esteemed or reviled (depending on one's point of view) as the site of propositional disclosure. If imagination is at work in either field, working against a horizon of imaginative cogency (including notions of complexity, depth, and intensity), within a concept of aesthetic validity where questions of authenticity, significance, and integrity are paramount, then evaluation of better or worse artistic and scientific practices can be defended. Techno-scientific projects can be evaluated against Zuidervaart's principle of "life-giving disclosure marked by fidelity to the commonly holding and commonly held."

Aesthetic signs matter because they "make multiple nuances of meaning available in ways that either exceed or precede both idiosyncratic expressions of intent and conventional communications of content" (AT, 160). Since presentation is a process where "creatures, events, and products" become "aesthetic signs" and take on a "role . . . in the pursuit of cultural orientation and reorientation" (AT, 160), Zuidervaart's insistence on the ordinariness of aesthetic presentation in the lifeworld bridges the gap found in Monroe Beardsley's correspondence theory of truth, which leaves art neither true nor false, and between individual psychology and societal structures. Zuidervaart's conception of "intersubjective processes" as the site of human creation includes exploration and presentation of aesthetic signs so that "[w]hile such processes require individual agents and perceptual capacities, the processes themselves are intrinsically hermeneutical and historical" (AT, 214).

5 Perception and Expression

Zuidervaart's recognition of individual agents and perceptual capacities accords well with both Ricoeur's and Merleau-Ponty's grounding of their theories of metaphor and expression in the prelinguistic phenomenal body, discussed in chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is "our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions,"³ so our work is intrinsically expressive and initially perceptual.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text," 199.

Perception is fundamental for Merleau-Ponty but is raised to reflection as the perceiving subject lives and acts. Merleau-Ponty's later notion of expression is perhaps closer to Zuidervaat's Heideggerian-inflected ideas of disclosure and discovery than one might think. The human is an incarnate, perceiving subject entwined with the flesh of the world. The body appears, is born, but natality is ongoing:

[T]he perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth . . . like a new language; we do not know what works it will accomplish but only that, once it has appeared, it cannot fail to say little or much, to have a history and a meaning. The very productivity or freedom of human life, far from denying our situation, utilizes it and turns it into a means of expression.⁴

A close reading of Merleau-Ponty's later essays, in particular "Indirect Language" and "Voices of Silence," reveals his awareness of the body as a linguistically mediated, socially and historically oriented, body, not just a perceptual one. James Steeves comments that for Merleau-Ponty, "[e]very human experience, including instincts and desires, lends itself to symbolic and linguistic expression."⁵ Merleau-Ponty, as early as his original study, *The Primacy of Perception*, said that "Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning, and we cannot say or do anything without its acquiring a name in history."⁶ The subject's grasp on the world is dialectical, since the world also grips the subject. The body lives in a world of perception but raises perception to critical thought.

Merleau-Ponty argues against a domination of objective thought in which the body becomes one object among many. From the centrally situated perspective of our own bodies, existence is inherently hermeneutic and interpretative. To conceive of the body as an object among objects is to dehumanize ourselves and others. Merleau-Ponty links the body with space and time, underscoring our experience of the body as that which "haunts space," rather than a thing in space like other things. The body is "much more

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text," 199.

⁵ Steeves, 94.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, PP, xix, quoted in Steeves, 94.

than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions.”⁷ Expression and communication, noted as polarities in Kant but paired as part of imagination in Zuidervaart (aspects taken up into exploration, interpretation, and presentation), are similarly joined in Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, language develops as an interpretative process in a social and cultural matrix:

[A]ll communication supposes in the listener a creative reenactment of what is heard. Language leads us to a thought which is no longer ours alone, to a thought which is presumptively universal, though it is never the universality of a pure concept which would be identical for every mind. It is rather the call which a situated thought addresses to other thought, equally situated, and each one responds to the call with its own resources.⁸

Language is a reciprocal process for humans, a doubling of expression and communication in a dynamic call and response. Merleau-Ponty says that the call of one human being to another is always already expressive and intentional and takes place from the midst of being (ILVS, 103). Merleau-Ponty’s explication of necessary intersubjectivity in every modality of embodiment including the linguistic and pictorial enriches the attempt to encounter the biotic world. The “gesture of expression” inscribes its intention upon the world and in doing so retrieves the world. If our language *vis à vis* the biotic world can forfeit our sedimented tradition of domination and exploitation and inaugurate a new understanding, we might dwell in a world where creatures and environments have living presence and therefore can claim rights and obligations from us.

All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already *primordial expression*. Not that derivative labour which substitutes for what is expressed, signs, which are given elsewhere with their meaning and rule of usage, but the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs, makes that which is expressed dwell in them through the eloquence of their arrangement and configuration alone, implants a meaning in that which did not have one, and thus – far from exhausting itself in the instant

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text,” 198.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

at which it occurs – inaugurates an order and founds an institution or tradition. (ILVS, 104)

By *signs*, Merleau-Ponty refers to what Zuidervaart would term *aesthetic signs*, including language. Merleau-Ponty's notion of aesthetic signs is more wide-ranging than Zuidervaart's, although there is an overlap. For Zuidervaart, aesthetic signs require a focused interplay of expression, presentation, and import whereas Merleau-Ponty's notion of signs can be read to include nonaesthetic cultural practices which are nevertheless communicative.

6 Natality: Inauguration of Hope

The notion of *natality* or *becoming* has links with Heidegger's formulation of Dasein as a site of disclosure in *Being and Time*, an idea retained and refined by Zuidervaart. The *advent* of meaning as a dynamic inscription of the human upon an already given world, including the sociohistorical world, is also a primary insight in Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. Zuidervaart approaches disclosure via a critique of Heidegger's notion of disclosure as truth. Disclosure alone is insufficient as a site of better or worse life-giving orientation. Disclosure must be rendered available for evaluation. Zuidervaart locates existential openness in a lifeworld where human beings can recognize, formulate, and negotiate ideas of "resourcefulness in the production and use of goods, . . . solidarity in the development of human communities, or justice in the governance of social institutions" (AT, 97). These elements of practical wisdom have parallels in Ricoeur's exposition of an ethical life.⁹

Merleau-Ponty does not address issues of better or worse "life-giving disclosure" as the culmination of "human self-expression, orientation, and discovering," as Zuidervaart does (AT, 96), for Merleau-Ponty's main interest is the recognition of artistic truth as the embodied gesture of the artist, not the intervention of a "Spirit of Painting" (ILVS, 105),

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Problem of the Foundation of Moral Philosophy," in *The Foundation and Application of Moral Philosophy: Ricoeur's Ethical Order*, ed. H. J. Opdebeeck (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2000), 13–14.

via Hegel, nor an outpouring of “genius” in a conflagration of being via Heidegger. I suspect that the notion of “life-giving disclosure” would be an unarticulated given for Merleau-Ponty as a philosopher of faith, rather than suspicion. One of the purposes of art for him is the articulation of truth, through the mystery of rationality (ILVS, 110) which he considers an intersubjective process:

The other whom I respect gets his life from me as I get mine from him. A philosophy of history does not take away any of my rights or initiatives. It simply adds to my obligations as a solitary person the obligation to understand situations other than my own and to create a path between my life and that of other, that is to express myself. Through the action of culture, I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine. I confront them, I make one known to the other, I make them co-possible in an order of truth, I make myself responsible for all of them, and I create a universal life, just as by the thick and living presence of my body, in one fell swoop I take up my dwelling in space. . . . The words, lines, and colors which express me come out of me as gestures. They are torn from me by what I want to say as my gesture are by what I want to do. . . . Words, even in the art of prose, carry the speaker and the hearer into a common universe by drawing both toward a new meaning through their power to designate in excess of their accepted definition. . . . This spontaneity of language which unites us is not a command, and the history which it establishes is not an external idol: it is ourselves with our roots, our growth, and . . . the fruits of our toil. (ILVS, 112)

This passage, quoted at length, shows the binding together of perception, history, and expression in Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of intersubjective life in which aesthetic signs, language, and pictorial images are ordinary and life-giving. They create an intersubjective bond and are a realization of shared history, as well as a projection into a dynamically inscribed future. In Ricoeur, whose initial preoccupation was the unfolding of the problematic of evil, we find texts to be fictive and historical vehicles that prepare humans for ethical practices. Ricoeur says:

. . . this movement (*parcours*) of actualization, this odyssey of freedom across the world of works, this proof-testing of the being-able-to-do-something (*pouvoir-faire*) in effective actions which bear witness to it. Ethics is this movement between naked and blind belief in a primordial “I can,” and the real history where I attest to this “I can.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Ricoeur, “The Problem of the Foundation of Moral Philosophy,” 13–14.

Imaginative disclosure is hermeneutic cultural pathfinding. It is at work in science and art as a way of dwelling in the world. As Zuidervaart says, it can be evaluated by markers of depth, complexity, and intensity. These markers refer to intersubjective processes that include the biotic world. We are saved or lost together.

7 Retrieval: Ethical Imagination

Science finds a working truth in exploring and manipulating the biochemical world. Its findings and practices seem cordoned off from active human principles of justice and solidarity. Principles are often mentioned as affordable or unaffordable in various contexts of technocapitalist global society. These arguments devalue human beings as sites of disclosure of truth. Expediency is truth—expediency in terms of capitalist economic values, and it is justified by its “objective” externality. The social and historical growth of human societies is devalued and destroyed in a warped notion of growth that annihilates both nature and humanity. For Zuidervaart, reintegrating imaginative cogency as a horizon and aesthetic validity as a principle into the propositional and nonpropositional truth of science can reorient its function as part of the flourishing of life.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body reveals a sense of truth in intersubjectivity that complements Zuidervaart’s notion of truth as “fidelity to principles that people hold in common and that hold them in common” (AT, 98). A unity of existence holds ethical truth for Merleau-Ponty, who says that “[a]ll human acts and all human creations constitute a single drama, and in this sense we are all saved or lost together. Our life is essentially universal.”¹¹ Ricoeur’s ethical stance has three elements: the good life for oneself, the need for others, and the necessity of just institutions. Narrative, as metaphoric utterance, is a process of actualization that creates the self and opens the fictive world of others to the individual. According to Ricoeur, ethics is interpretative. Self-construction through narrative creates self-esteem that is

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text,” 202.

actualized only through the mediation of the other.¹² Zuidervaart broadens the notion of intersubjectivity to include the biotic realm, for the body of the earth on which nonhuman creatures live also will be “saved or lost together.” Merleau-Ponty has touched upon this breadth of vision, in calling the “phenomenon of expression . . . a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole.”¹³ We must hear their call and work in the truth to promote the flourishing of life. Metaphorical truth in verbal and nonverbal forms is a necessary inauguration of new creative forms in artistic practices.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 179.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, “An Unpublished Text,” 203.

Chapter 5: Visual Metaphor

A thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist even for itself.

– PP, 177

Being is that which requires creation of us for us to experience it.

– VI, 197

1 Aesthetic Ontology

Merleau-Ponty's expressive philosophy has had an impact beyond the aesthetic world of painting and sculpture. His work has been taken up by contemporary architects as well. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa, in an influential treatise, "The Eyes of the Skin," connects Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the lived body with the practice of contemporary architecture. He says that "modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless."⁵ Pallasmaa too shares philosopher Mark Muldoon's interest in time, articulated in Merleau-Ponty as expressive of living experience. Pallasmaa says, "architecture domesticates limitless space and enables us to inhabit it, but it should likewise domesticate endless time and enable us to inhabit the continuum of time."¹

Key elements in Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty lend themselves to current topics in postmodern thought, especially the lived body, narrative identity, the tension of linguistic sedimentation and innovation, and the act of reading.² Such topics are important in current aesthetic dialogues and art practice. Muldoon points out:

There has been much discussion lately as to the proper place of Merleau-Ponty in the various dialogues of postmodern thought. Some scholars argue that Merleau-Ponty should be part of this dialogue because of his attempt to overcome modern dualism and subjectivism; others, meanwhile, have engaged Merleau-Ponty in

¹ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2008), 1

² Mark S. Muldoon, "Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty on Narrative Identity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (Winter 1997), 1.

fruitful dialogues with Derrida. There is even the assertion that Merleau-Ponty's logic of visibility cannot now be read independently of Derrida's logic of supplementarity.³

Topics such as dualism and subjectivism are important in current aesthetic dialogues, art practice, and architectural theory as shown by Juhani Pallasmaa's essay linking Merleau-Ponty and contemporary architectural practice. After Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961, Derrida, Sartre, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean-Luc Nancy – in the areas of structuralism, hermeneutics, and deconstruction – criticized Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the speaking subject. The works of these philosophers, in protest against ontological claims, build on analyses conducted within the frame of the artwork itself as contingent. (Their arguments will not be examined here but it is important to understand the context of the development of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur's philosophies.)

The idea of lived experience situated in a singular body has figured in feminist and postfeminist studies, there becoming further inflected with questions of gender and difference. Julia Kristeva's project, naming an ontological *chora* (flesh), grounds language in pre-reflective experience inseparable from the body of the speaking subject. This resonates with Merleau-Ponty's ontology, where subjects are inextricably intertwined in the "flesh of being."

2 Reading the Visual as Metaphoric Utterance

Metaphoric meaning, in the sense of one thing telling another, is mysterious and compelling. Philosophy enters into this mystery, having entertained questions regarding beauty and truth for thousands of years. As a visual artist, I have investigated in this thesis the function of the metaphoric imagination in visual art, drawing on Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur to delineate that edge where seeing and saying are liminal borders, each to the other. I have tried to understand this edge of seeing and saying

³ Ibid., 36.

through philosophic investigation. I have also questioned how meaning is manifested in colour and form, and have seen how abstract painting and installation art can suggest multiple meanings that reconfigure our experience in the world.

Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur have contributed much to the discussion of metaphoric utterance, with key terms such as *lifeworld*, *expression*, *aesthetic ontology*, *nativity (advent)*, and *presence*. In chapter 2, I noted how Ricoeur's exposition of metaphor preserves an imagistic or perceptual moment, an iconicity, in the encounter with linguistic metaphor (RM, 231). The well-crafted metaphor brings into being a new creation that becomes part of language as a creative force, so that nonrepresentational painting can also have reference:

Denotation does not cover the whole field of referential symbols and . . . works of art with null-denotation – as is the case with non-representational paintings – keep referring in a non-denotational way, for example by exemplifying and expressing.⁴

During much of the nineteenth century, painting depicted themes of classical antiquity and literary or religious subjects, or else it functioned to memorialize historic events and personages. For Merleau-Ponty the paintings of Cézanne, Klee, and Matisse, in particular, become integral to a new ontology of painting. These painters broke with previous figurative tradition, coming instead to depend heavily upon colour, line, and a deformation of the traditional one-point perspective. In Merleau-Ponty's view this modernist focus on the elements of painting brings the artist and the viewer closer to a prephilosophical, preverbal experience of the world. Artists who choose to work with the elements of painting bring to artistic expression a realm of preverbal experience. Colour, form, line, texture, and shape are fundamental ways we experience the world. Through art we are brought back into contact with them. Expression is a metaphorical process that transforms raw experience into another kind of experience (such as a

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Review of Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking*," in RR, 211.

painting) that enlarges our singular life with the life of others. Painting bears that experience to us in the presence of new creative meaning.⁵

If modernism focuses on colour, form, and line as aspects of expressive presence in painting, postmodernist practices can be interpreted as demonstrating a resurgence of interest in the cognitive value of art as well as in historical contextualization, in which language plays an important role. Postmodern art practices can be understood as metaphorical in a Ricoeurian sense; many postmodernist visual art forms, for example, blur the boundary between seeing and saying. Many postmodernist works are read as well as seen, and their power resides in the overlap of seeing and saying. Metaphor functions in various ways, both verbally and non-verbally, with respect to postmodern forms of installation art, earth art, book art, and the reconfiguration of ready-made objects within a gallery setting.

3 Abstraction and the Metaphoric Imagination: Howard Hodgkin

I think an understanding of Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur's convergence around the theme of metaphoric utterance adds to an understanding of contemporary art. My philosophical explorations of this theme have helped me develop criteria for understanding and evaluating such art works with reference to their theories of metaphor and expression. For me, artists who reconfigure elements of tradition into new formations that resonate with multiple metaphoric meanings create strong works, which breathe life.

Howard Hodgkin is one such artist. His work lives at the borderline between representation and abstraction; his painting is and is not a painting of something in mimetic representation. Yet it is not a formalist array of paint disposed according to

⁵ Merleau-Ponty says: "Painting does not copy movement point by point or by offering us signs of it. . . . It invents emblems which give it a substantial presence, presenting it to us as a 'metamorphosis' (Rodin) of one attitude into another, the implication of a future within the present" ("The Sensible World and the World of Expression," in *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960*, trans. John O'Neill [Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1970], quoted in James Steeves, *Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Imagination* [Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2004], 63).

line, colour, mass, and volume in an abstract, potentially decorative fashion. Richard Kendall writes of Hodgkin's painting, *Italy*:

Rarely has his paint been so lyrical, his imagery so poignant, yet its engagement with recalcitrant reality so overwhelming. The immediate surprise is the chosen mode: there can be no doubt that we confront a landscape, its radiant blue sky and surging sea generically familiar to us all, its view of a distant coastline redolent of the departure and arrival we all carry in our memories. But again Hodgkin makes a myriad other readings simultaneously and equally available: the horizontal sweeps of coffee-brown and liquid white offer a mighty response to the great rectangle of the frame, the splashes and wipings of colour the vestige of their muscular interaction; a wisp of rainbow across the centre has no obvious logic, defining a complementary delicacy and hinting at Corot-like nuances of atmosphere; and at left, a drawn line – a rarity in Hodgkin – might be the rigging of a ship, a further refinement of his framing or the echo of a topographic. . . . Hodgkin acknowledges all these possibilities and many more from past and present, yet the reason why *Italy* is so glorious, we finally realize, is that he resolves them into one inevitable whole and offers it to us with reckless generosity.⁶

The painting offers polygraphy – multiple imagings – that thwart expectations implicit in the title and offer glimpses of landscape that resolve into a new and surprising unity. The work's title bears us towards the Ricoeurian polysemic variation essential to the "ruins of literal sense" that give us a new metaphoric utterance. The sedimented tradition of landscape surfaces in hints of Corot, visible to the informed observer. The creation of new and surprising meaning is built on an informed practice of painting where references can be discerned; they are not imitated, but recast to shape new reference. The shaping of these new references changes the landscape so that now we may see Hodgkin-like "nuances of atmosphere" in some new work. Hodgkin himself plays with reference and makes this relationship to the tradition of painting explicit in *After Corot* (see figure 2).

The viewer completes the hermeneutic circle by discovering the allusive and evocative rendering that the painter has made. Past works of art do not close off the hermeneutic

⁶ Richard Kendall and Robert Rosenblum, *Howard Hodgkin, Large Paintings 1984–2002* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 2002), 29.

circle; past works can be interpreted in terms of their meaning to their contemporaries with the recognition that our interpretation is necessarily of our time and will invite more interpretations in the future. Ricoeur states this as follows:

Because a gap keeps recurring between making and rendering, he is never relieved from the duty of painting. . . . The experience of the artist, it seems to me, encompasses the whole range of meanings from making to surrendering through representing and interpreting. (RR, 211)

In Hodgkin's work, abstraction does not work as synecdoche (a part standing for the whole) but creates forms – colour, line, and shape – that point further, where visual metaphoric utterance opens possibilities to see and think more. Hodgkin's vision opens up the possibility of reconfiguring the visual for us, which we incorporate into our experience of his work, the works of other artists, and the visual world generally: we learn to see. The artist shows us "a promised land but never an occupied one."⁷

⁷ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 4.



Figure 2. Howard Hodgkin, *Italy*, 1998-2002; oil on wood



Figure 3. Howard Hodgkin, *After Corot*, 1979-1982; oil on wood

4 Linguistically Turned: Amy Loewan

Contemporary forms of art such as installation art and new media, which incorporate and shatter textual elements, demand a linguistically informed, hermeneutic interpretation, with which the work of the metaphoric imagination can be discerned. Furthermore, Ricoeur's philosophy of faith retains a fullness of reference to the world that makes these works ontologically meaningful.

For Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty, referential meaning is seen to occur within the world, the self, and the other: all three elements are bound in relationship.⁸ This referential relationship is ontological, having to do with being. It is revelatory, not revealed: a process, not an achieved static knowledge. Furthermore, the advent of meaning in an intersubjective world requires an ethics. All imaginative functions exemplify moral intention and can harm or benefit others.

For Merleau-Ponty, artists present work that brings the hidden and mysterious aspects of the visible to painting. With an ontological grasp of the whole, artists render visible the depth, space, and colour of our being in the world – and this is not a pictorial rendering of the visible world. The work is an occasion of the visible appearing.⁹ Taking an insight from Gestalt theory, Merleau-Ponty interprets it ontologically: the foreground (*figure*) is never isolated from the background (*fond*), and vice versa. He says:

Space is not . . . a network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a third party. . . . It is, rather, a space reckoned starting from me as the null point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me. (EM, 138)

⁸ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*.

⁹ "The proper essence of the visible is to have a layer of invisibility in the strict sense, which makes it present as a certain absence" (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *PrP*, 187/*EMF*, 85, quoted in Steeves, 58).

Amy Loewan's *Peace 5*, a large-scale woven rice paper hanging recently exhibited at various public galleries across Canada, incorporates text woven so that words are obscured and visible simultaneously (see figures 4 and 5).¹⁰ The piece's black-and-white colour scheme and large scale immerse the viewer in language that is image; image that is word. The meaning is both visual and linguistic: the words spell *peace* in a multitude of languages. The enigma is compelling; one absorbs a large image that breaks down into microelements of text. The hanging conveys a sense of harmony through its formal elements and its material constitution. The word has a presence amplified by its presentation as a visual artwork. It resonates with tradition, and echoes the Biblical accounts of Babel and Pentecost, where language was ruptured and healed, respectively.

¹⁰ Amy Loewan, Web site, <http://www.amyloewan.com/> (accessed June 30, 2010).

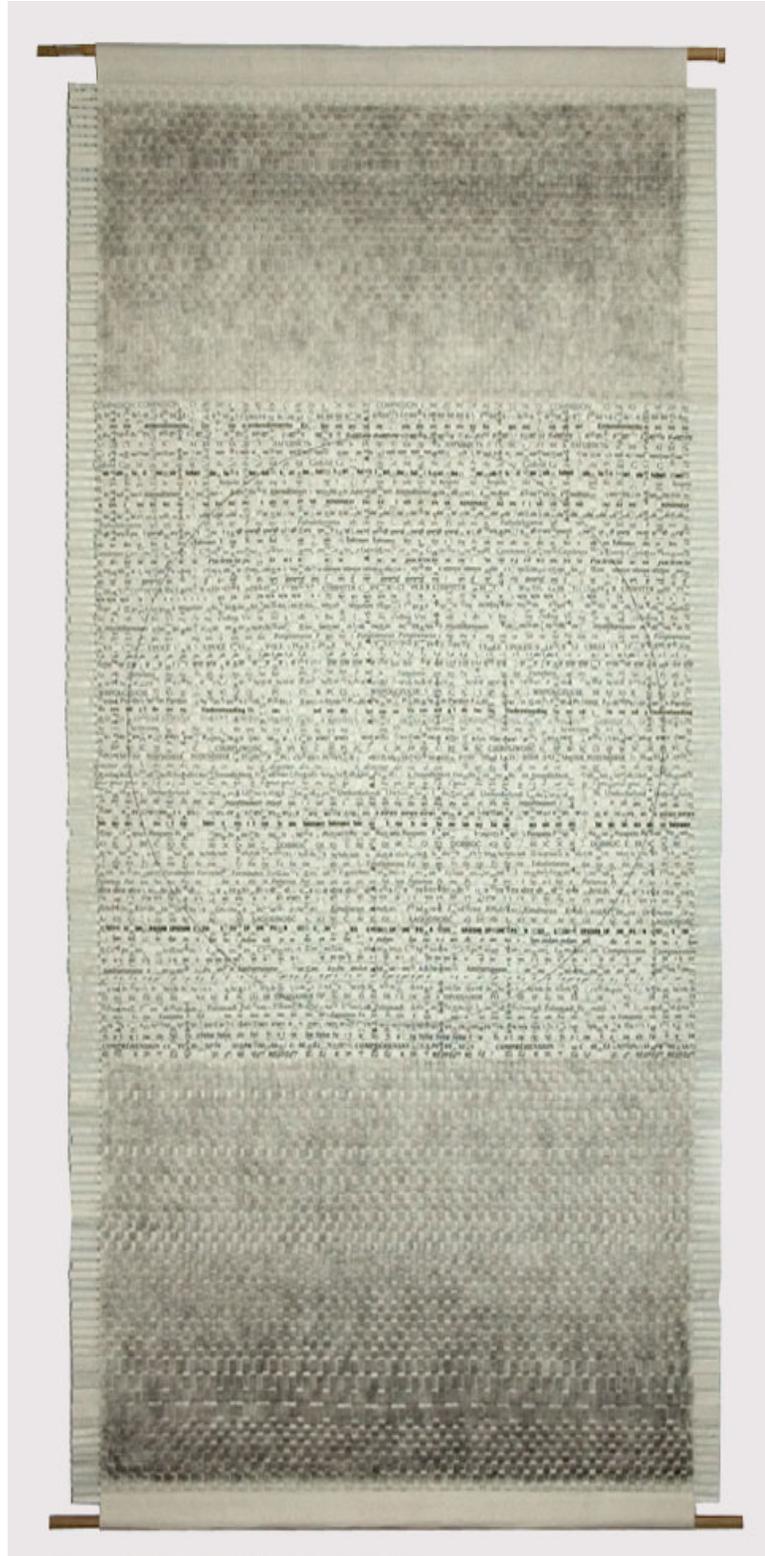


Figure 5. Amy Loewan, *Peace 5*, 2002; woven rice paper, ink, graphite (8' x 4')

At the micro level the work is fragmentary, shattering sense. We are made to work to refigure the disrupted linguistic elements into some kind of textual logic. At the macro level the graphite circle conveys peace and binds the fractured text into a whole.

5 Art Practice: Living Experience, Metaphoric Process

The phenomenological focus on incarnate life within a deep, historical, and contemporary cultural context has permeated postmodernist art practice, becoming a philosophical premise in contrast to earlier values of beauty and the sublime. In postmodern terms, *art practice* refers to the performative aspect of an artist's work, rather than the production of art works as objects. Art practice refers widely to performance, installation, time- and photo-based works. Some works are ephemeral, their existence documented only as traces in photos, writings, or film, after the event. Postmodern artistic discourse and works (ephemeral or not) feature themes such as environmental art as embodiment in the natural world, and explorations of gender, race, and sexual difference as situated viewpoints from which to make art. The work of Merleau-Ponty is fundamental to the discussion of such themes.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of artistic practice as lived experience resonates with important postmodern precepts such as *embodiment*, *contextualization*, and *reversibility*.¹¹ In particular, the theme of embodiment is central for feminist scholars such as Luce Irigaray, for whom Merleau-Ponty was a seminal thinker.¹² Merleau-Ponty's declaration that "Every theory of painting is a metaphysics" (EM) contends that the artist's whole being is caught up in the act of painting: a circle of work, world, and artist revolving in active expression; and the body of the artist may be specifically female. Art practice that

¹¹ In "What Is Literature?" (1947), Jean-Paul Sartre stated that only writing can engage contemporary life and times; painting, poetry, and literature are mute. See Galen A. Johnson, "Structures and Painting: "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in Johnson and Smith, 14–34, for Merleau-Ponty's relationship with Sartre and *Les temps modernes*. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty became estranged personally, politically, and philosophically in 1952.

¹² Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.

incorporates the body in a hermeneutic circle of expression shatters the determinacy of previous social constraints, such as gender, and opens up new possible worlds.

The web of meaning woven by artist, work, and world is broad. Neither internalist explanations of art “which find art’s meaning in the artist’s intentions or life,” nor “externalist explanations, which look to social or other contextual sources of meaning,” will suffice to explain meaning woven from experience by means of metaphor and expression.¹³

6 Living Experience, Environmentally Turned: Stacy Levy

Merleau-Ponty does not disregard the personal, but he is more interested in the process of painting as living experience. He also recognizes the reception and transmission of art as cumulative, opening to a world of the work unintended and unpredicted by its creator:

Cultural creation is ineffectual if it does not find a vehicle in external circumstances. . . . A preserved and transmitted painting develops a creative power in its inheritors which is without proportion to what it is---not only as a bit of painted canvas, but even as a work endowed by its creator with a definite meaning. This significance which the work has in excess of the painter’s intended meaning involves it in a multitude of relationships which are only faintly reflected in short histories of painting and even in psychological studies of the painter. (ILVS 105)

For him, the personal provided an amplification of possible meaning, not a reduction to an internalist interpretation. The metaphoric function was active in existence beyond the purely personal, and would resist social or historical causality. For both Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur the infinite possibilities of language and image configure, refigure, and appropriate¹⁴ tradition anew, shattering determinacy at the individual and societal levels. Living experience has become the material and method of many varieties of

¹³ Jonathan Gilmore, “Between Philosophy and Art,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 293.

¹⁴ Ricoeur’s terms.

postmodern art. For example, Stacy Levy's *Tide Flowers* incorporates vinyl flowers attached to pilings in the Hudson River (figure 5). Breathing with the exhalation of the sea, they float like flowers opened by the full water on the flood tide; on the ebb they collapse against the exposed pilings.

Some artists' projects require large-scale funding and the cooperation of architects, engineers, and other artists. No longer unique objects owned by a patron, these types of works redeem environments, respect their site, and enrich public life with aesthetic and scientific expression. One of Levy's other works, *Watermap*, is a map carved in indigenous rock showing the watershed of the Delaware River (figure 6). The river lines are incised to scale, in depths corresponding to the path of the real rivers so that rainwater travels down the map as the water descends the watershed and collects in a water basin. The aesthetic experience unites humans, rock, water, land, and mapping.

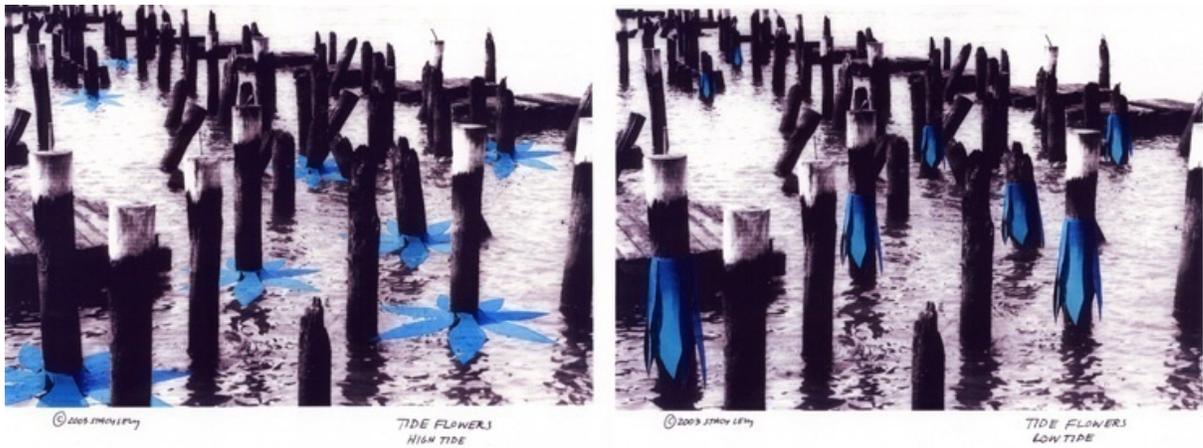


Figure 6. Stacy Levy, *Tide Flowers*, 2004–2008; 40 pylons of marine vinyl, polycarbonate plastic, and steel (9' x 9' x 9'); Hudson River Park, New York, NY

Art as event, performance art, and the insertion of art practice in nonart environments have enriched artistic practice. The contextualization of art in nonart public spaces is an attempt to resacralize our secular world. It is an attempt to reinsert the human in a postindustrial landscape that is primarily focused on modes of production and consumption. The human element reinserted into public space reclaims it, showing up our fragility, mortality, and embodied ambiguity, in contrast with human-made but inhuman and inhumane environments.



Figure 7. Stacy Levy, *Watermap*, 2009; carved stone; Wynwood, PA

7 Ontological Reconnection of Voice and Vision: Spencer Turnick

Ricoeur claims the value of metaphorical utterance in reconnecting us ontologically with others. He advocates a recognition of the split reference. That is, our interest in manipulation and control can be suspended – and in fact, challenged and transformed – by the imagination if we recognize our primary belonging to the lifeworld :

An examination of the power of affirmation unfurled by poetic language shows that it is not only meaning that is split by the metaphorical process but the reference as well. What is abolished is the reference of ordinary discourse applied to the objects that respond to one of our interests, our first-order interest in manipulation and control. When this interest and the sphere of signification it commands are suspended, our profound belonging to the lifeworld is allowed to be and the ontological tie of our being to other beings and to being is allowed to be said by poetic discourse. What is thus allowed to be said is what I am calling the second-order reference, which in reality is the primordial reference. (FT, 174-5)

The poetic invocation of the human body in works such as Spencer Turnick's large-scale installations of human volunteers in a variety of settings, natural and man-made, raises issues of human mortality and fragility. The mortality of the earth is referenced as well. The setting often is a city, where the insertion of so many nude bodies is a dynamic contrast, a shocking impertinence in a context in which we are normally clothed.

For this viewer, the best of Turnick's installations is a poetic utterance of the ambiguous nature of our relationship with the natural world. We are part of it, revealed in the photographs like deshelled molluscs, defenceless in wind and weather, naked, unarmed, weak, yet strong in number. Our strength surrounds us in the city installations; our mighty works enclose us, support us, and torment us. In the work sited on a Swiss glacier (figure 7), human bodies nest in the lap of the frozen river. We are frail but so powerful that we reshape these rivers of ice, melting them before their time, reducing them through greed and ignorance. The work frames these issues and challenges our assumptions about strength and endurance, and pits human time against glacial time, the *adagio* of mountains, the litany of clouds.

Ricoeur's analysis of second-order reference as primordial reference is vital to the task of reimagining utopian and even dystopian visions of our lifeworld. Spencer Turnick's art projects suspend our interest in manipulation and control to present humans directly in the context of natural and man-made environments. They occur outside the "white cube" of the art gallery. There is no romantic view of the sublime in his work, but a nature we are shaping that also shapes us. Language is necessary for the discussion and interpretation of these works, but it cannot translate the work nor exhaust its meaning.

Works such as Spencer Turnick's lend themselves to unfolding on both Ricoeurian and Merleau-Pontian grounds. The themes of embodiment made visible in Turnick's work must be brought to language, even though the work's image remains irreducible to language. The scale of his projects and the use of naked volunteers as elements in the material composition of his works grip the imagination. His aesthetic projects, like Levy's, stimulate dialogue concerning humans and nonhumans and the body of the natural world. Nevertheless, through metaphoric utterance, discursive language preserves the nondiscursive moment as the foundation of experience. The pre-linguistic supports all linguistic concepts.



Figure 8. Spencer Turnick, Switzerland, Aletsch, Glacier 4 (Greenpeace), 2007



Figure 9. Spencer Turnick, Cleveland, Ohio 1, 2004

8 Time and Meaning

Merleau-Ponty's recognition of the transmission and preservation of artworks shows an appreciation of the "multitude of relationships" that surround the creation and reception of aesthetic work. Language transmits interpretations and involves time. The body, in the phenomenal sense, accumulates time as experience. For the body, in the ontological sense, there is the possibility of freedom in expression. Vision becomes rich with experience, a treasure house of visibility ripe for innovation and the production of new meaning. For the viewer, meaning is recreated with each viewing, and nuances accumulate as time passes.

In a grave misreading of his theory of the body and art, some critics of Merleau-Ponty miss the role of time in his thinking. Some see an unqualified acceptance of ambiguous embodied experience unconditioned by time and history in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Muldoon, for example, reads Merleau-Ponty as fundamentally ambiguous and essentially a precursor of the "prenarrative quality of experience" outlined by Ricoeur. He sees Merleau-Ponty proposing a negation of narrative with an "overemphasis on perceptual consciousness."¹⁵ Similarly, Adrienne Chaplin cautions the reader against a wholesale acceptance of Merleau-Ponty's notion of aesthetic experience as absorbed into the "broader realm of prereflective, bodily sense-experience," for "not all embodied, lived experience is necessarily aesthetically qualified."¹⁶ She points out:

To suggest that everything that escapes discursive language or scientific formulation and articulation therefore belongs to the artistic or aesthetic realm

¹⁵ Muldoon, *Tricks of Time*, 245.

¹⁶ Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, "Art and Embodiment: Biological and Phenomenological Contributions to Understanding Beauty and the Aesthetic," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 (2005), <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=291> (accessed June 30, 2010).

and vice versa, merely perpetuates an unhealthy view of art versus science and, by implication, a feeling or emotion versus thinking dichotomy.¹⁷

Both Muldoon and Chaplin caution against an over-reliance on the notion of perceptual consciousness and a dichotomy of aesthetic experience versus the realm of abstract scientific thought. In my view this dichotomy is not one supported by a close reading of the later Merleau-Ponty. Chaplin's warning is precisely against this type of reading. Rather than a dichotomy of discursive and nondiscursive thinking, both are entwined in metaphor and expression. Language must preserve the nondiscursive moment, as Ricoeur says; and art must be brought to language for discussion, for its preservation and transmission, as Merleau-Ponty says.

Merleau-Ponty scholar Mikel Dufrenne extends the discussion of discursive and nondiscursive meaning with reference to an open system of language that relies on prereflective experience. His work expands on Merleau-Ponty's work on metaphor with a particular focus on the border between art and language:

[W]hen we say that the esthetic object speaks to us . . . it is a metaphor: the esthetic object is mute, it shows and does not speak; or rather it shows itself; it is there, it appeals to our perception. And it is a complete whole that we perceive. . . . Consequently the semantic function in art is exercised at the level of the whole and not at the level of the elements.¹⁸

Dufrenne sees a link between art and nature via culture, since culture is incipient in the hearer, seer, and reader of art. The sensible is brought to perception and meaning and is manifest, similar to Ricoeur's and Merleau-Ponty's notion of *advent*. Carnal expression is endemic to art forms because they are perceptual. Dufrenne says that in reading a poem "what is necessary is to read with one's whole body, which mobilizes our whole being in order to join us intimately to the object."¹⁹ The way we say what art expresses is

¹⁷ Chaplin, under "Conclusions," para. 9.

¹⁸ Mikel Dufrenne, "Is Art a Language?" *Philosophy Today* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1970): 198.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

to language it, but Dufrenne states that “art is not a language-form” except as it connotes or alludes with a surplus of meaning.²⁰

He raises a question that seems to drive many projects of postmodern art: “rather than clarifying art by the language-form, would it not be necessary to clarify the language-form by art?”²¹ The art works I have referenced function as metaphoric utterances that do not rely on language for explication of their meaning but are brought to the level of history and memory through language, as they are discussed and disseminated through books, magazines, and the Internet. They achieve metaphoric utterance that is irreducible to linguistic translation. Loewan’s work fragments and builds up the language of peace to a powerful visual metaphor in which the *word is the flesh* of the piece. Levy’s pieces powerfully lead to further thinking about our place in nature as embodied beings, part of a universe that moves, breathes, and changes with inundation and drought. She masterfully combines science and art to accomplish the manifestation of what Paul Crowther calls contextual space. He says:

If an artist wishes to represent some nonvisual meaning through a visible configuration he or she must utilize idioms that draw upon a shared visual cultural stock with an associational range, which encompasses the intended sorts of nonvisual meaning.²²

Flowers, water, bodies, and tides reference by encompassing, not pointing to meaning. These elemental things resonate with our bodies and our pre-reflective life. They are not concepts to understand but work to lead us through perceptual aesthetic experience, to “think more” as Ricoeur says about the fragility and sustainability of such things. Crowther’s notion of contextual space, an outgrowth of his work on Merleau-Ponty,

²⁰ Ibid., 200.

²¹ Ibid., 200.

²² Paul Crowther, “Painting, Abstraction, Metaphysics: Merleau-Ponty and the ‘Invisible,’” *Symposium* 8, no. 3 (2004): 642.

does not turn the artwork into “visual text.”²⁶ Instead, linguistic exploration begins with the perceptual experience of the artwork that manifests nonvisual meaning.

9 “Pastor of Oaks, Shepherd of Stones”: Ian Hamilton Finlay

Finally, I would like to consider the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay, who refigures tradition in remarkable ways that are highly relevant to a discussion of the edge between seeing and saying. He brings sedimented tradition to the fore in his vocabulary of neoclassic forms and text from historical figures of the French Revolution, among other sources. He uses these historical sources as imagery, text, statuary, and garden design. He rebirths lost ideas so that they reawaken us to history and reposition our own political assumptions. His work is varied and uses diverse media: broadsheets, concrete poetry, chapbooks, landscape design, installation, and many other forms. He often situates text in a landscape but without labelling a view or denoting an idea. In a tension between the said and the seen, his landed texts demand a re-viewing of the landscape, and a rethinking of the text, together.

Finlay defies generalities or summing up. He demands the appropriation (in Ricoeur’s sense) of his works by the seer/reader who must argue them through, though his images remain enigmatic, provocative, and dense with meaning in the imagination.

Brian Stefans says:

His discovery, upon placing his first concrete poem on the landscape, was that the poet is not limited to describing Utopias but that the poet can usurp a medium that was once thought reserved to architects, and bring syntax to the physical landscape. In the process, he has also utilized a number of the most volatile symbols in his quest to escape an ironized (and hence forgetful) view of history, to find stasis in the postmodern flux, to describe the presence of the death in his “Arcady,” and to make cultural statements that are direct and altering, yet also enigmas.

²³ Ibid., 633.

The works *demand* to be judged (the Epic Theater comes to mind) but one also recognizes the difficulty of rendering them propaganda for a political cause, for they all retain the quality of the “toy,” all of them foregrounding their artifice as much as anchoring themselves within the “ethical” conscience – retaining, finally, the sheen of a formalist self-referencing that place them well within the idiom of the postmodern.²⁴

Finlay’s projects invoke the monuments of the past – the graveyard, the victory stele – and use forms of modern industry and war. In the piece shown in figure 10, the text turns back upon itself and subtly speaks for the forest and the stream, challenging our presence. We are made to look with our ears and hear with our eyes. There is much more than subtle wordplay at work. An alchemical transformation of our presence in the land happens and the mute landscape is regains its sacred character.

Finlay’s work exists on the edge of perception and language in an oscillation of linguistic and nonverbal meaning. His work is deep and rich, able to hold as many linguistic references as one can bring to it but pointing beyond language, working on the nonverbal level as strong metaphoric utterance.

²⁴ Brian Kim Stefans, “On Ian Hamilton Finlay,” *Jacket* 15 (December 2001), paras. 16–17, <http://jacketmagazine.com/15/finlay-by-stefans.html> (accessed June 30, 2010).



Figure 10. Ian Hamilton Finlay, The Shady Grove, The Murmuring Stream, The Shady Stream, The Murmuring Grove; granite

10 Conclusion

Zuidervaart systematically dialogues with other thinkers in his border crossings between the analytic and continental traditions in philosophy, whereas Merleau-Ponty proceeds in a less systematic way in “Indirect Language” and “The Voices of Silence” engaging his opponents Hegel, Heidegger, and Malraux. Ricoeur systematically studies metaphor from the level of rhetoric to his theory of metaphor as a principle of articulation at work in narratives that construct both the self and society. Though treated in less detail in Chapter 4 and 5, Ricoeur’s theory of metaphorical truth informs my critical apparatus with respect to linguistically tuned postmodern art in which the cognitive dimension of language is at work. Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the incarnation of the subject in cognition is helpful in articulating my own critical dialogue with my own working processes. Zuidervaart’s global perspective widens my horizons and challenges my ethical commitment to both human and nonhuman subjects in making aesthetic signs that matter.

Zuidervaart tackles two major positions regarding truth; correspondence, and propositional theories, and their antitheses. Whilst Merleau-Ponty approaches truth initially through an investigation of perception as fundamental and the body as the locus of truth, Zuidervaart breaks down artistic truth into aspects of authenticity, significance, and integrity within a process of imaginative disclosure consisting of aspects of exploration, interpretation, and presentation. Merleau-Ponty considers truth as an act of the perceiving body within the world, carrying out projects in linguistically and culturally mediated practices in all dimensions. For Merleau-Ponty, existential unity is the subject entwined with the world and other subjects; truth as expression does not reside in the state of being of the subject. For Zuidervaart, the articulation of new social paradigms to break the stranglehold of the technocapitalist hegemony is a major concern. Making better decisions in the aesthetic dimension – which is part of the scientific enterprise – is vital and urgent, a matter of “life and death” (AT, 115).

To summarize, Zuidervaart's delineation of imaginative disclosure has affinities with Merleau-Ponty's description of perception, expression, and history combined in a person's gesture toward the world. Human beings are not solitary; their advent is an appearance of engagement with others in a world; the individual's life is both for oneself (*pour soi*) and for others (*pour autrui*; ILVS, 110). Zuidervaart extends the distinctions made by Heidegger concerning "being-in-the-world" (AT, 79) to include nonhuman subjects and a concept of biotic entities.

Zuidervaart challenges artists to a wider view, a mending of the rift between art and science, and a binding together of nothing less than human and nonhuman nature in a dynamic sense of truth.²⁵ Merleau-Ponty directs philosophers to a project of hope, saying that "The meaning of philosophy is the meaning of a genesis" (ILVS, 119). Ricoeur's emphasis on metaphorical truth in texts, both fictive and historical, provides a hermeneutic that situates ethics in the imaginative process.

The notion of expression found in Merleau-Ponty articulates my sense of being in relation to my work and to others. Zuidervaart's work carries beyond Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic ontology and Ricoeur's phenomenology of reading to a conception of truth that extends beyond the merely human. Zuidervaart's systematic delineation of the dimensions of artistic truth within a wider general conception of truth informs and challenges my awareness of attempting to be "in the truth" in a postmodern world, and expands my horizons as to the possibilities and dynamic criteria of making aesthetic signs that matter. His work opens the imaginative possibilities of aesthetic signs that incorporate and relate to the biotic world, perhaps the world that is silent for us, a world we have yet to hear.

²⁵ Lambert Zuidervaart, "Unfinished Business: Toward a Reformational Conception of Truth," *Philosophia Reformata* 74, no. 1 (2009): 1.

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